UNVEILED! See the new Zerg in **STARCRAFT II**—*only in PC Gamer!*

PC GAMER

BIOSHOCK 2

Thought Big Daddy was tough? Meet **Big Sister...**

Dual-wielded fishguns?! Check out page 44!

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10

things you had no idea you needed

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DISC EDITION

PC GAMER

JUNE 2009

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PLEASE NOTE

Screen shots and other artwork in this pdf have been downsampled and compressed. For the most accurate representation of game artwork please refer to your hard copy of PC Gamer.

FUTURE SHOCK

Hop into the Wayback Machine with me for a sec. Let's set the dial back to 1999, a mere decade ago. Now, ask your former self who you think the biggest players in PC gaming will be circa 2009. (And try to do so without screwing up the space-time continuum, thanks very much.)

Now, without even tagging along on your lovely time-traveling jaunt, I can guess with 100 percent accuracy three names you'd absolutely never dream of including: Capcom, Sega, and Square Enix.

Funny how much things can change in just ten years. For starters, you've got Sega: Once a proud console manufacturer, now a console-agnostic publisher, still fueled by its Japanese roots but with a nascent PC tradition brewing thanks to its smart purchase of Creative Assembly, the team behind the beloved (and unapologetically hardcore) *Total War* franchise. Then, you've got Square Enix, the most Japanese of Japanese console publishers, with a storied history of profoundly Japanese console RPGs, including the *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* franchises. At press time, however, Squenix was circling around a purchase of Eidos, and I'm told by insiders that this potential pickup has nothing to do with Japan and everything to do with expanding into the U.S. and Europe with Western-style, PC-friendly games. And that's not even mentioning the fact that Squenix is publishing *Supreme Commander 2*, the eagerly anticipated sequel to Chris Taylor's beloved PC strategy masterpiece.

But perhaps most interesting to me is Capcom—and not so much because I'd welcome a half-decent port of *Resident Evil 5*, but more because of what Christian Svensson, Capcom's veep of strategic planning, has been saying recently. Shortly after joining the PC Gaming Alliance, Svensson made the rounds on the Web chatting about Capcom's interest in the PC. The primary takeaway: "The PC is global, and it's ubiquitous," Svennson told PC-centric blog Rock Paper Shotgun. In other words, the PC is the perfect platform to penetrate new markets around the world, especially emerging markets where consoles aren't the primary platform of choice. And while that might not seem all that important to those of us in this fully emerged market that we call America, what it *does* mean is that smart companies like Capcom are starting to see the PC as the enormous opportunity that it is. And more money for them means more—and, dare I hope, *better*—games for us.

> The primary takeaway: "The PC is global, and it's ubiquitous"

So step into the Wayback Machine, dial yourself back into the present, and join me in this issue's celebration of PC gaming. The future looks bright indeed, thanks in part to three unlikely publishers. Anyone care to speculate on what surprises we'll see in the next decade?

GARY

/// GARY STEINMAN, EDITOR IN CHIEF ///

THE PLAYLIST 0609

GARY STEINMAN EDITOR IN CHIEF

"Too soon," Gary declared when *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* came out in 2007. But as the Iraqi conflict winds down (we hope!), our fearless leader thought it appropriate to finally experience contemporary combat at its finest.

LOGAN DECKER EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Although many things improve with age, Logan is finding that, in his case, aim does not appear to be one of them. This makes completing *F.E.A.R. 2* a slightly more daunting challenge than he'd expected.

DAN STAPLETON REVIEWS EDITOR

Caesar, Napoleon, and Palpatine were chumps. Those guys were running just one empire each, but Dan has much bigger ambitions: He's playing both *Sins of a Solar Empire: Entrenchment* and *Empire: Total War.*

EVAN LAHTI ASSOCIATE EDITOR

The giant war bears and psychic schoolgirls of *Red Alert 3: Uprising* had Evan in B-movie heaven this month. *ArmA* also helped him fulfill his contractual obligation to use the words "Bravo" and "vector" once per hour.

DAN FITZPATRICK LEAD DESIGNER

A nasty head cold left Dan a bit muddled this month, but the sheer joy of dual-wielded fishguns, pizza-slicer-wielding baddies, and hammer-wielding Martian terrorists helped PCG's resident grump (barely) make it through deadline.

JOSH AUGUSTINE EPIC INTERN

After four years of binge *WoW*-playing, Josh has been happily admitted to the PC Gamer rehab center. Heavy doses of *Red Alert 3, Team Fortress 2,* and of course other MMOs have been prescribed. Tasty, tasty MMOs...

Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

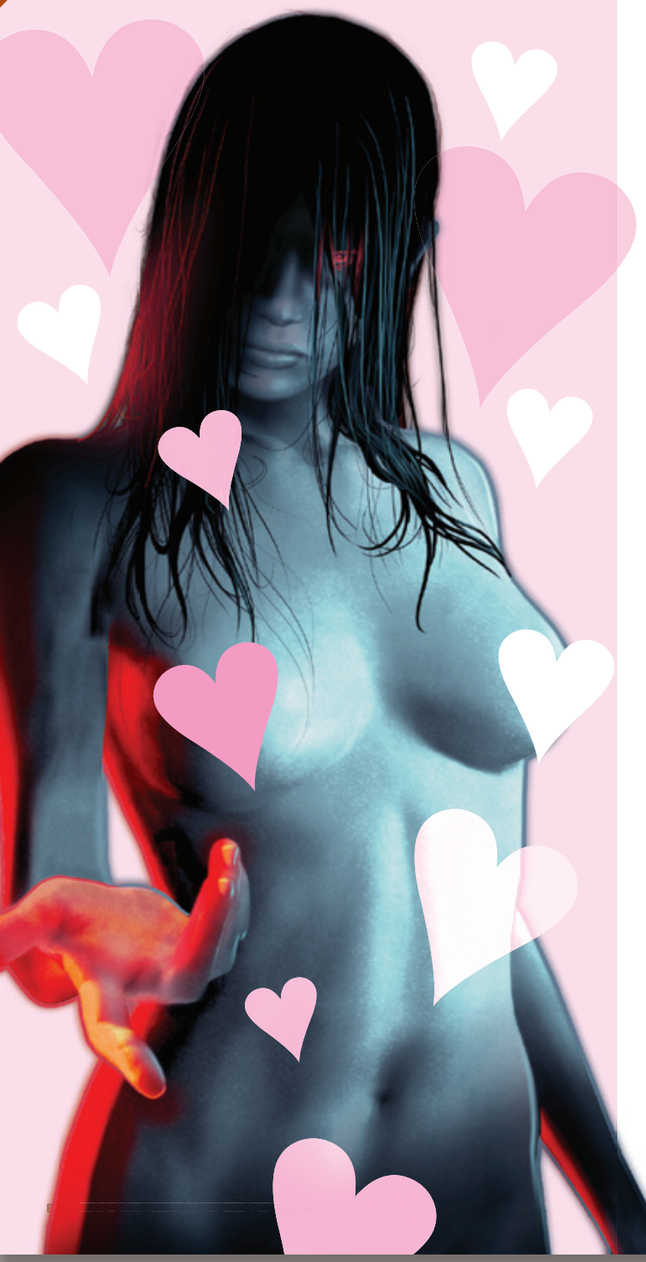
PC Gamer (ISSN-1080-4471) is published 13 times a year, monthly plus Holiday issue following the December issue, by Future US, Inc., 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Periodicals Postage Paid at South San Francisco, CA, and at additional mailing offices. Newsstand distribution is handled by Time Warner Retail. Subscriptions: One year basic rate (12 issues): U.S.: $29.95 Canada: $49.95 Foreign: $69.95. Canadian price includes postage and GST (GST #128220688). Outside U.S. and Canada: Add $2.00 per issue. For customer service, write PC Gamer Customer Service, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658, or call (800) 898-7159. Postmaster please send change of address to PC Gamer, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658. Corporate, advertising sales, circulation, editorial, and production offices: 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Phone: (650) 872-1642. Fax: (650) 872-2207. Editorial information should be addressed to Editor, PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Overnight delivery parcels should be addressed to PC Gamer, 4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400, South San Francisco, CA 94080. Unsolicited manuscripts cannot be returned or acknowledged. Future US also publishes Maximum PC, Mac|Life, Official Xbox Magazine, PlayStation: The Official Magazine, Nintendo Power, Guitar World, Revolver, Future Snowboarding, Snowboard Trade News, and Pregnancy. Entire contents copyright 2008 Future US. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. Reproduction on the Internet of the articles and pictures in this magazine is illegal without the prior written consent of PC Gamer. Game Players, Game Players Guide, and Game Players Encyclopedia are tradenames of Future US. Products named in these pages are tradenames or trademarks of their respective companies. Future US is not affiliated with the companies or products covered in PC Gamer. IPM# 0781118. Produced in U.S.A. Ride-along Enclosure in the following edition(s): C1, D1, D2, D3, D4. Standard Enclosure: None. Publications Mail Agreement #40043631. Returns: 4960-2 Walker Road, Windsor ON N9A 6J3

PROPS FOR ALMA'S KILLER NEW LOOK!

Is it weird to think an evil dead girl *[April]* from a game is sexy? DOPEMANJOE

Is the April cover an attempt to entice more people to give necrophilia a try? Alma does not exactly look like in the pink of health. AARON SEET

Oh. My. Gods. Alma is so hot now! And there's *three* of her: a hottie, a cute little girl, and an old hag. Could she get any cooler? She is definitely the hottest videogame character of all time now. Please, please, *please* make a pinup poster of your cover. TIM STUMP



/// *Mirror's Edge:* Um, hello? Anybody wanna play? ///

READER ADVICE TO DEVELOPERS

I finally finished *Mirror's Edge*, and I wish I hadn't missed the part of your review *[March]* where you mention the game's lack of multiplayer. The city you hop around in is beautiful, and the gameplay is exhilarating, but why do developers keep stopping short on potentially awesome games? Please pass my disappointment onto Dice and EA. MATTHEW PENNER

I also don't care how much a game costs me, since the cost per hour is some of the best value in entertainment you can find. So I urge developers to go the extra mile. Ditch checkpoint save systems—it's a dealbreaker. So is requiring an internet connection to load, play, or save. I have money to spend. I'm just wary of spending it on great games weighed down by so much baggage. PETER MATHISEN

I am reading your latest issue and found myself talking to it. So I decided to send you my thoughts. Replayability is not something I need from a game, since I barely have time to play them through once as it is, and by the time I'm through once, more great new games are vying for my pinched time.

> "Why do developers keep stopping short on potentially awesome games?"

GENRE BLUES

What happened to space sims? At one time these games (*Star Wars: X-Wing*, the *Wing Commander* series, etc.) were everywhere on the PC. It might not have been as big then as FPS games are today, but it was still a respectable genre with a large enough audience. After what seemed like a never ending stream of great (and some not so great) space sims, the fun just stopped. Why did this genre die and why so abruptly? Do you know of anything on the horizon that I haven't heard of? DANIEL LAZARUS

It's hard to say why there have been so few ace space sims recently, although four regrettable television seasons of Star Trek: Enterprise *certainly didn't help science fiction in general. But no good genre stays down for long.* Naumachia: Space Warfare, *for example, is one of the sweetest-looking space sims we've seen in a while—you'll get a full preview soon in an upcoming issue!*

PARTY POOPERS

I think you missed the point of Grant Gehr's complaint about the lack of party-based RPGs *[Letters, March]*. In response you listed a bunch of RPGs that have come out of late, and they are all admittedly fabulous, but not one of them features the tactics side of RPGs that people like Grant and I are missing. Every game you listed allows you to control only a single character, three characters, or a single character with cohorts/companions (which is *not* the same thing as a six-player party).

I don't want to anger the RPG gods by seeming ungrateful for the fantastic RPGs 2008 gave us, but like Grant, I want to see a return to the format of building, leveling, and strategizing for six characters at a time. Hopefully *Dragon Age: Origins* will deliver just that. JIM JENKINS

THE 50TH DEVELOPER

In your report on "The 49 Greatest Developers" *[April]* you overlooked two British lads from Cambridge: Glyn Williams and Michael Powell, who created *I-War* (later "Independence War") back in 1997, replacing the old arcade shoot-em-ups with real science to more accurately reflect the true nature of space. When you tried to maneuver the game's primary starship—a huge Dreadnaught-class corvette—you had to be aware of real physics like inertia and momentum as the ship started turning in a great, strained, almost creaking arc, or you were done for. ROBERT CONLEY

How about Turbine? *Lord of the Rings Online* is fantastic and *Asheron's Call* is still kicking after almost 10 years! Turbine continues to update and improve both games, and their dedication and longevity should be noted. GEOFFREY SMITH

I was shocked to find that Relic wasn't acknowledged in your list of the top 49 developers. Relic has been making high-quality, creative RTS games since *Homeworld*, and has recently advanced the genre with *Company of Heroes* and *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II*. Not only has Relic created some of the best RTS's ever, but it also follows that up with large patches and free content. Definitely one of the top 50 PC game developers of all time. DAVID CURTIS

LETTERS

Write to us at letters@pcgamer.com and one of two things will happen: We will either print the letter in our magazine, or we will not. If we print your letter, you will become instantly famous. If we don't, well, it's nothing personal.

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Want a copy of *Plants vs. Zombies*, boxed copies of *Peggle* and *Peggle Nights*, a *Peggle* mug, plus a garden shed-load of Popcap swag? Just email contests@pcgamer.com with "Salad Shooter" in the subject line, and include your full name and mailing address in the message body. Contest ends June 12, 2009. See full contest rules on page 95.

"WORLDS BEYOND WARCRAFT" READERS BITCH AND *MMOAN*

WHAT ABOUT ME?

Normally you guys hit the nail, but Worlds Beyond WarCraft *[April]* left me scratching my head. *Warhammer 40K, LoTRO, Guild Wars, Age of Conan*: sure, great games. But *Planetside* (20,000 people currently playing) over, say…*City of Heroes/Villians, Lineage II, FFXI* and others that are pulling *way* more than 20K gamers to play them? NATHAN SEVRINUS

OR ME?

I mostly agreed with your assessment of the games featured in Worlds Beyond WarCraft, but I can't for the life of me figure out why you didn't include *Anarchy Online*. In fact, I never would have tried *Anarchy Online* in the first place if *PC Gamer* hadn't given it the award for MMO of the Year in 2001! ED RODRIGUEZ

AND ME?

How could you include *Pirates of the Burning Sea* and *Planetside*, but not *City of Heroes*? DAVE WEIRS

NOT A LEG TO STAND ON

I was thoroughly enjoying the review for *Empire: Total War* (April 2009) when something started to nag at me. There was something wrong, something very odd that I just couldn't put my finger on. Then suddenly it hit me like a few tons of rampaging pachyderms: the cavalry soldiers on page 72 all seemed to be double leg amputees. There it was, a row of dangling stirrups with *no* feet to be seen anywhere. All the poor soldiers seemed equally afflicted except for the officer raising his sword at the front of the charge. Graphical glitch? Or 18th century recruitment practice? DOUG BAILEY

Sorry, Doug—we're stumped!

BIOSHOCK 2

/// No, this isn't the new Big Daddy. But you'll have to be patient—all will be revealed soon enough. [Or flip ahead to p.16 if you can't wait.] ///

IT'S TEN YEARS LATER AND YOU PLAY THE ORIGINAL BIG DADDY

"The player of a first-person shooter is a plexiglass-faced powerhouse that thunders its way through corridors and occasionally is asked to care about things that it's never met." This is Jordan Thomas, Creative Director of *BioShock 2*. He's about to tell us who we play as this time. "The Big Daddy prototype seemed like a logical choice."

Big Daddies, the moaning diving suits that trudged the city of Rapture's dank halls, were *BioShock*'s most fascinating creatures. And it was a fascinating place: an underwater haven for society's elitest elitists, gone horribly wrong with the discovery of the flesh-altering miracle goo Adam. You crept through its ruins with a wrench and a grudge, only to find (spoiler!) that you'd been an unwitting slave, psychologically hard-coded to murder Rapture's founder Andrew Ryan and obey his slimy rival Frank Fontaine.

VITALS // DEVELOPER: 2K MARIN, 2K AUSTRALIA **PUBLISHER:** 2K GAMES **RELEASE:** FALL 2009 **URL:** WWW.CULTOFRAPTURE.COM

/// Being a Big Daddy just got a lot more fun. This time around, you can use Plasmids along with a full assortment of high-powered weaponry. ///

Ten years on, both men are long dead. That clears the way for a darker, stranger story in a more broken, twisted Rapture. One entirely about Big Daddies, Little Sisters, and the lives they once had.

You're the first Big Daddy ever made, and the most powerful. You were built to use any of their weapons, not just one. You have all of their resilience but little of their sloth. And your suit, unlike theirs, allows the use of Plasmids. You're the reason every other Big Daddy was crippled and brainwashed: You were too good. The team won't talk about what you did to make your creator—presumably Dr. Suchong—abort his plans to make any more creatures like you. "Suffice it to say they decided to simplify," Thomas says.

Thomas and his team at 2K Marin are stingy on plot details for spoiler reasons, but forthcoming about everything else they're working on. Most of what defines *BioShock 2* stems from your place in the heavy steel boots of a rogue Big Daddy. It determines who you fight, what you fight with, where you can roam, and—most potently—your relationship with the Little Sisters.

The tiny children Big Daddies exist to protect were one of the few disappointments of *BioShock*. They were beautifully animated, fascinating and evocative to watch, but your interaction with them felt rather abstract. You could remove the parasite possessing them to gain some of Rapture's main resource, Adam. Or you could remove it in a slightly different way that ultimately gave you roughly the same Adam, but made her vanish rather than leaving her defenseless.

We're explaining this, and not very kindly, because the way it's changed is probably the second-most significant thing we know about *BioShock 2*. (For the top reveal, flip ahead to page 16…) "The way you participate in the ecology this time," explains lead environment artist Hogarth de la Plante, "is something that we call Little Sister adoption." You still have the option to kill a vulnerable Little Sister on the spot for an immediate fix of Adam, but your other choice is a longer-term investment. "You put her up on your shoulder, and the two of you work together as a team."

While a Little Sister is riding on your back, she'll point out Adam-rich corpses from which she can "Gather." It's your choice where to set her down, and it's one you'll need to prepare for. Once she sets about her foul work—syringing blood from the recently dead and drinking it to process its goodness—it draws the attention of Rapture's inhabitants.

THAT MEANS SPLICERS: genetically modified humans gone headwonky…and a decade more in Rapture has taken an even dearer toll on them. "They've had to become apex predators," says Thomas. "They've had to sit there at the top of the Adam food chain murdering all their old flames and drinking buddies and slowly splicing themselves into something that can survive." So when the scent of freshly extracted Adam is in the air, these sad Elephant Men can't afford to be shy. They come in swarms.

This is a problem. They'll mostly attack you, since getting the Adam out of a Little Sister is tricky with her Big Daddy around. But if you leave her unattended during the fight, Splicers will menace her and interrupt her profitable blood-suckery. That only prolongs the onslaught. Luckily, of course, you have a giant freaking drill on your hand…

SPLICERS: GENETICALLY MODIFIED HUMANS GONE HEADWONKY

/// Big Daddy likes his splicers well-done. ///

STEP OUTSIDE

Part of *BioShock 2*'s mission statement is to give the player a new perspective on Rapture, and there's a very specific way that being a Big Daddy can feed into that. You can go outside. That's a deep-sea diving suit you're wearing, after all. But don't worry about trying to use a fire plasmid while surrounded by water; the team has wisely decided not to shoehorn any combat into these excursions.

"The intent for the gameplay there is that it is, sort of ironically, where you get to breathe," de la Plante says. "Where you get to go outside, harvest live Adam slugs, and listen to pieces of the story, kind of indulge that voyeur muscle that every player has to look in on what you're about to enter. I think that the really moody parts of *BioShock*, and probably some of the really emotional parts of *BioShock*, are going to take place in the water."

PLASMID COMBOS

CONFIRMED

Cyclone Trap + Incinerate = Fire Trap

CONJECTURE

Target Dummy + Electrobolt = Booby-Trapped Dummy

Winter Blast + Sonic Boom = Instant Shatter

Insect Swarm + Enrage = Ultra Bees!

/// Once you adopt a Little Sister, you'll have to protect her when she harvests Adam from dead splicers. ///

/// Rapture has decayed even more in the decade that's passed since you last saw the underwater dystopia. ///

When the Little Sister is finished, and all the Splicers are dealt with, your tiny friend will return to you and grant you all the Adam she's gathered. At which point, of course, there's nothing to stop you killing her and taking the Adam-rich seaslug that was keeping her alive. If you want to ensure her safety, though, find one of those grand-looking art deco air vents they crawl from and help her back into it.

In case you were wondering, "The adoption mechanic is a direct rebuttal to the horrible escort quest that you may have played in other games starting with *BioShock*," Thomas laughs. If you want to draw a point of comparison to its predecessor, adoptions have more in common with the Big Daddy fights—which will also return.

"I felt it was time to allow *BioShock* to start guitar-soloing in one of the places that we do well," Thomas colorfully puts it. "Allow the player to take the territory, and then bring the world to them. That's what the dynamic sieges are about: Knowing something is coming and allowing you to use *every* tool, every bit of planning that you might have developed and mastery over the systems, to turn that situation to your advantage. To make sure that whole first wave falls on its face and bleeds out."

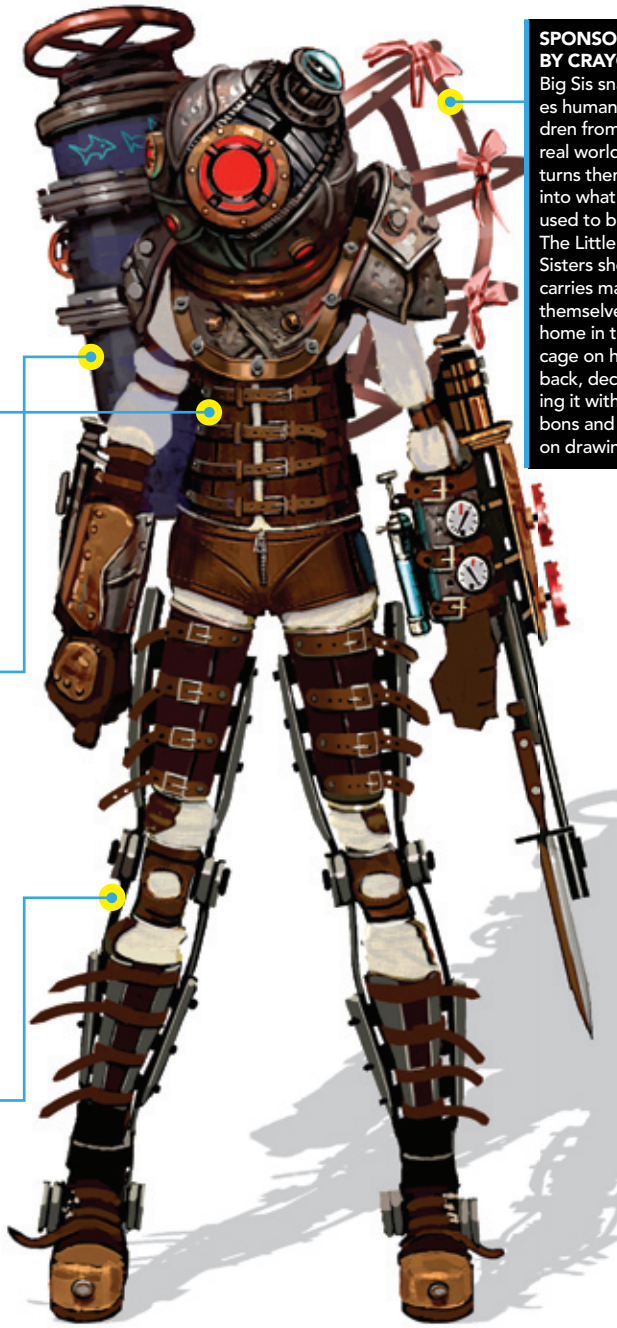
YOUR HARDWARE FOR DEALING with the incoming hordes includes the iconic Big Daddy drill-bit, the Splicer-skewering Rivet Gun, some unannounced weapons, and an upgraded suite of Plasmids. It's that last option that lends itself to the let-them-come philosophy of combat. The team isn't talking about any we're not familiar with yet, but the ones you invest in will change function and even combine with other Plasmids in new ways.

"So if you invest in fire," Thomas says, "each time you invest Adam in Incinerate, you get another version, which means you can hold it down and release a burst, and ultimately use your hand like a flamethrower."

Weapons and Plasmids can be used simultaneously, rather than requiring you to switch between two discrete modes, because a Big Daddy can hold pretty much anything in one hand. The weapons are a big risk: It always looks gruesome when a Big Daddy impales someone on his drill in a scripted sequence, but it's not going to feel as convincing in first-person when you're not truly making holes in anyone. What we've seen of the combat compensates for that with sheer volume of blood, spurting it liberally in your face to mask the drill/flesh interface beneath. We'll be honest—it seems to work.

/// Surprised by Big Sis? Wait till next month, when PC Gamer has the world-exclusive reveal of *BioShock 2*'s multiplayer modes! ///

MEET BIG SISTER



LITTLE DADDY She's a Little Sister who's tried to turn herself into a Big Daddy, which explains why she looks kind of gawky. This is the suit she's made for herself.

MANA WAR The blue substance is Eve, fuel for Plasmids. Big Sis has much more powerful versions of the ones you know, including a version of Telekinesis that hurls everything in the room at you.

YOU'VE LOST WEIGHT The Big Sister's strength comes from Adam, Rapture's magical stem cells. Even so, she still needs braces to support the weight of the elaborate suit on her skeletal frame.

SPONSORED BY CRAYOLA Big Sis snatches human children from the real world and turns them into what she used to be. The Little Sisters she carries make themselves at home in the cage on her back, decorating it with ribbons and crayon drawings.

The only voice we know will be nattering to you while you're out in the depths is Tenenbaum's. The German geneticist who created the Little Sisters is ten years older, but she's still as tiresomely guilt-stricken as ever. This time it's because of one of her creations in particular.

You could be forgiven for still wondering, this far in, what the hell any of this has to do with a girl on a beach. Most of us guessed that in the first teaser trailer for *BioShock 2*, the young woman looking wistfully out to sea was a Little Sister, a little grown up. She's grown up a little more in *BioShock 2* itself, and it hasn't gone at all well.

This is Big Sister, a woman who outgrew her role as a blood-drinking Adam gatherer, but not the psychological conditioning that made her a slave to Rapture's sick ecosystem in the first place. She's too old to be a Little Sister, so she's tried to turn herself into a Big Daddy, strapping herself into a home-made spiky feminine version of their diving suits. And since there's a shortage of Little Sisters in the city—thanks to a certain Jack Ryan—she's been out in the real world abducting human children.

HERE'S THE TWIST: You're not on a righteous quest to stop her. On the contrary, *she's* on a quest to stop you. You're just trying to survive long enough to escape Rapture entirely, and that means adopting or harvesting Little Sisters for the Adam you need to get by. Either option infuriates Big Sister: Her life's work is restoring Rapture to the way she remembers it.

"After a certain number of Little Sisters that you've taken away from their Big Daddies, the Big Sister comes and finds you wherever you are," Thomas says. "She'll hunt you down anywhere on a level."

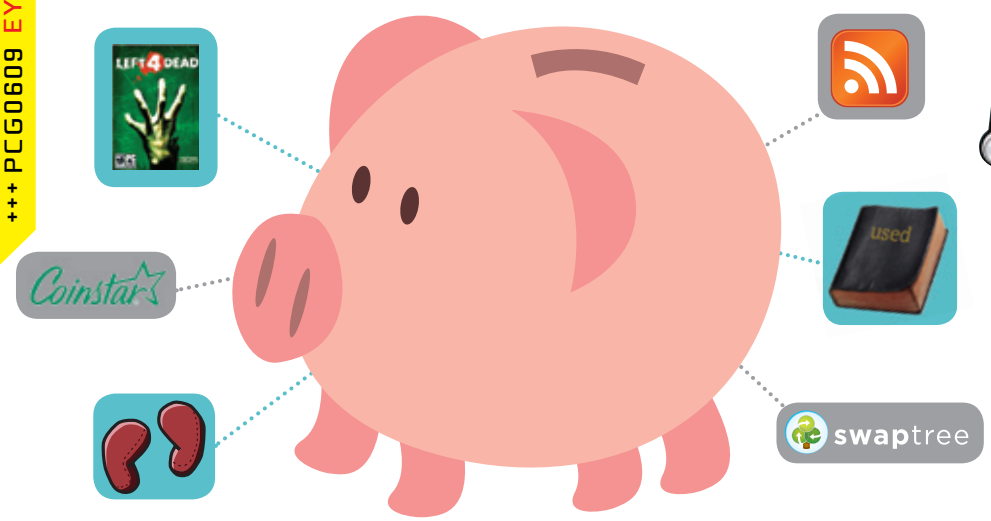
"It's our goal to make sure the player feels like he's being stalked," adds lead designer Zak McClendon. He describes it as "an inverted form of your own relationship to hunting Big Daddies, where you follow one along for a while until he gets into the exact right area, then jump him at that point." He beams. "We want to have her doing that to *you*."

In the scripted demonstration we saw, Big Sister leapt around Rapture's atriums like a treefrog, hurled furniture at the player with telekinesis, smashed him to the ground, and broke down the glass keeping the ocean out. It was a bad day for Prototype Big Daddy. The team made it clear that you'll fight the Big Sister many times throughout the game, but they wouldn't give us a straight answer on how you win these fights without killing her.

Other mysteries also remain unanswered: In *BioShock*, the Vita-Chambers that resurrected you each time you died worked because they were made for Andrew Ryan, and you shared his DNA. In *BioShock 2* the Vita-Chambers work for you, the first Big Daddy, and we don't know why. It makes you wonder which Little Sister the first Big Daddy was charged with protecting, how old she would be now, and why someone might keep coming back however many times you fought her. TOM FRANCIS

GAME SAVING!

Five simple recession-busting tips that'll save every PC gamer major bucks



Free games, GOG.com, abandonware, Kongregate.com, eBay—you already know the standard tricks of PC gaming on a budget. But here are five sly maneuvers you might not have tried yet—and there's never been a better time to trim a few more bucks from the budget. LOGAN DECKER

1. Sign up with Swaptree.com

Post a list of the PC games that you want to get rid of, as well as a list of the PC games you want, and Swaptree's logarithmic nerdulator will hook you up with suitable trading partners (you can also swap console games, books, DVDs, and CDs). There's no fee for the service—you pay only for shipping, and Swaptree even allows you to print a postage-paid shipping label from your own printer!

2. Check local bookstores for used PC game sections

While Gamestop does brisk business selling used console games, it no longer sells used PC games. But if you look around, you'll find that a surprising number of used bookstores do carry used PC games. We wouldn't recommend buying any game with a multiplayer component as the CD-key may already be in use, but used bookstores are a great way to find some of the classics with their satisfyingly chunky old-school manuals.

3. Subscribe to RSS feeds

An RSS feed delivers news stories from your favorite websites to your desktop throughout the day, and you can read any story just by clicking on the headline. These feeds are a great way to make sure you never miss out on online discounts and promotions—including free-play weekend orgies regularly offered on Steam.

All you need is an RSS reader—Google Reader (www.google.com/reader) is free and easy to use. Whenever you see the orange RSS logo on a website (pictured above, top right), just click on it to subscribe.

4. Cash in at Coinstar

Heave that water-cooler jug that's been accumulating change for the past seven years over to your local Coinstar machine (check www.coinstar.com for locations), but instead of exchanging coins for bills at an usurious 8.9 percent fee, opt to receive an Amazon.com certificate instead and keep every cent! Then use that Amazon.com certificate to buy *Company of Heroes: Tales of Valor*, pre-order *BioShock 2*, and reward yourself with J&D's Bacon Salt Sampler ($14.62 with Super Saver Shipping).

5. Don't buy games within three months of launch. Ever.

Yes, this requires superhuman self-control. But if you wait until the hype dies down, you'll be able to take advantage of price reductions down the line, you're likely to get a better product that's patched and playing at peak performance, and you'll never be suckered into paying top-dollar for a massively hyped game that turns out to be a digital turd.

Approximate going rates for the sale of human tissues and organs (at press time): Blood: $0. Blood plasma: $35 per visit. Blood platelets: $50 per visit. Eggs: $5,000-$20,000 per visit. Sperm: $50-100 per visit. Bone marrow aspiration (for research): $100 per visit. Hair: up to $500; varies by length and condition. Kidney: $20,000 and up (illegal in the United States).

the spy

Did you know that the id is the unorganized part of the personality that governs basic drives? The Spy sure didn't. Wikipedia also claims that rage is a mental state that ranks as extreme intensity on the spectrum of anger, but The Spy knows that ***Rage*** is really a Mad Max-inspired first-person shooter and racing game under development by *Doom* and *Quake* developers id Software. The Spy also knows that it isn't going to be released in 2009. **id Software** has long had a "done when it's done" policy, but The Spy fondly remembers the days when id would release a game every two years.

During The Spy's bimonthly sleepover in the secret tunnels weaving through **Ubisoft's** offices, he made a startling discovery. A convenient one-way mirror revealed a room filled with researchers who were, in turn, staring through another one-way mirror into a room of gamers. Focus testing was afoot, revealing that ***Assassin's Creed 2*** will be set in Venice. Having been to the Italian canal city, The Spy can confirm that its winding alleys and dead-ends are perfect for secretly murdering people and delivering their corpses to a watery grave.

Thankfully, some companies have the good decency to inexpertly keep secrets for The Spy to expertly reveal. You can even play along with The Spy at home if you've got a copy of ***Dawn of War II***. Have a poke around the video files within your install and you'll find unfinished intro cinematics to campaigns not included in the game. The Spy has word that three new campaigns are on the cards as downloadable content, and that their price may be very agreeable indeed. Look also for similar ***Empire: Total War*** DLC in the near future. Spy out.

THE SPY ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID LYTTLETON ; THE PIG ILLUSTRATION ©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/VIVIYAN

ALIEN MAKEOVER

BLIZZARD SHOWS OFF THE NEW LOOK OF THE ZERG

NAME: Samwise Didier
TITLE: Art Director, Blizzard Entertainment

When the new-and-improved *StarCraft II* Zerg were unveiled in March 2008, the new 3D graphics were such a huge step up from its predecessor's pixilated sprites that we hardly even noticed that the art was intended as placeholder.

Now Blizzard's venerable Art Director Samwise Didier (he's worked on every Blizzard game, including *Lost Vikings, Warcraft I–III, Diablo I* and *II, World of WarCraft* and *StarCraft*) and his team are steadily updating the Zerg with new unit models and textures, and in many cases the difference is so striking and impressive that it feels like we're looking at models from *StarCraft III*. We talked to Didier about the process of polishing game art up to the Blizzard gold standard. DAN STAPLETON

Was this art pass always part of the plan, or did the team decide "we can do better"?
When we decided to announce the Zerg, we wanted to have something to show, and so we kind of pulled all of our guys together to get together what we could, but it wasn't near what we wanted to show. Artists always want to polish more of their art; they're never happy with the way that it looks. We always like to go back over whatever we do and get it to the level that we want it to be. That's where we are at with the Zerg: We're finally getting them ready to show to the public, even though we showed them a year ago. We're pretty proud of it, too. It's finally starting to look the way we want it to, and we're glad to finally be able to show everybody the true glory of the Zerg.

Is every unit in the game getting this kind of makeover?
Yeah, we already did that with the

VITALS
DEVELOPER: BLIZZARD
PUBLISHER: BLIZZARD
RELEASE DATE: 2009?
URL: STARCRAFTII.COM

/// With their new look, a Zerg swarm has both quality and quantity. ///

Terrans and Protoss. We may go back and check them out, because every time we finish one, the ones we already finished start to look a bit dated. It's a vicious cycle. But we're going to be hitting up the rest of the Zerg units and we also have the Zerg buildings that we're taking a crack at. Currently we're going over the hive and the hatchery, all the upgrades for that, and we're going over the Hydralisk den.

How long does it take your team to create one of these new models?
We have about two or three guys who work on any one model at any one time. So we'll have a guy model it in a couple days, we'll have the texture guy texture it in a few days, and then we'll have the animator animate it in a day or two. Our animations in this game aren't that detailed—all they have to do is run, shoot, and die. So it takes a little bit over a week, maybe a week and a half, and that's on a simple unit. That doesn't count the portrait, either.

Will the upgrade in quality have any effect on system requirements? Or will these old models still exist in the game for people to see if they turn their settings all the way down?
That's another pass that we might have to do. We did that with *Warcraft III*, where we had lower-polygon models. Hopefully we won't have to do that on this one, but that's always been sitting there in the back of our schedule going we may have to get some time to do these. Which, it isn't really that hard. It's easy to chop out the polygons, like for example on the drone's wings, where OK, yeah, it looks killer, but we don't want to sit there and kill the game all for a couple of drone knuckles.

Is there any one unit that you're particularly proud of?
I really like a new unit that we're working on. We haven't announced anything on it yet, but there's a new Zerg unit that's looking pretty killer. If there's an old one, I would have to say the Ultralisk. The Ultralisk is still my favorite unit—it's a giant wrecking ball with spikes. And because it's so large, you'll really be able to see all the shininess and all the new texture work that we put in. Hell, even the drone is still awesome-looking, too. It's your base Zerg unit, yet it looks really cool and looks like it could just tear up everything.

With this art pass, you seem to be taking a more realistic, slightly less stylized and darker approach with the Zerg. In general there's less pink and purple and more brown. Is that a result of higher detail, or was it a conscious decision on your part to make them less cartoony?
I think in the shots that most people have seen, we have the team colors set to orange, which makes the entire Zerg look more brown and orange. If we set the team color to purple they're a bit more purple and brown. It sort of depends. We've backed off a little on the super-saturated colors, but we really like to keep them colorful, because when you're playing multiplayer you want to be able to see who's who—you can't have everybody just be brown and realistic.

The old drone has streaks of purple and yellow...
Yeah, it kind of looked like a totally temporary piece of artwork that we had in the game, which is what it was. We hadn't touched that one since the very first time we made the drone. There might have been a little bit more polys on him than when we first started, but he was the last remaining piece of art that needed to go through a second stage and finally be polished up, and you can totally see the difference.

Are these the final units or will there be more changes before launch?
I'm hoping that the bulk of it is final. There's always going to be some little tweaks to the units. Like, we just finished doing the new Infestor model, and it's looking a lot cooler. That was one of the units that the fans really didn't dig, so we said all right, let's go ahead and change this one. The new version takes the elements that everyone liked about the old Infestor, and we just put it on a more sinister, vicious-looking critter. But most of the art that we're doing, we're not changing it, we're just finishing it. The tubby fat infestor model is still in, by the way. It's delegated to single-player status so that people can still use it for mods.

"[The old drone] looked like a totally temporary piece of artwork, which is what it was. We hadn't touched that one since the very first time we made the drone."

10 THINGS

You had no idea you needed

LOGAN DECKER'S HANDY GUIDE TO THE CRUCIAL LOOT YOU SHOULDN'T LIVE WITHOUT

KEEP-A-CABLE *(on back of desk)* It's a notched card that attaches to the edge of your desk and keeps cables—including laptop DVI and power cables—from falling behind your desk when you remove them. The best thing to come from plastic since credit cards.
$5 per pack (4 to a pack), www.keepacable.com

C.H.I.M.P. MIRROR The C.H.I.M.P. mirror attaches to the corner of your display with Velcro (included) and gives you a wide-angle view of the world going on behind you, including the whereabouts of your supervisor. After a month or two, try taking off the C.H.I.M.P. mirror and tell me if you don't suddenly feel blind, naked, and vulnerable.
$6.99, www.thinkgeek.com (where else?)

DRIVER BACKUP Like showering, PC gamers have come to accept re-installing Windows on a semi-regular basis as a necessary evil. But it's no longer as much of a drag as it used to be, especially with Driver Backup, a free, open-source utility that automates the process of backing up and restoring the drivers you need for your hardware.
Free, sourceforge.net/projects/drvback

FRAPS This easy-to-use utility for recording video footage of your gameplay is also a screen capture app (it's what we use here at the PCG compound) as well as a fantastic benchmarking tool that dynamically displays your frames per second and even logs framerate statistics to a text file. A must-have software Leatherman tool for gamers.
$37, www.fraps.com

A SECOND DISPLAY We're going to forgive you if you don't already have one, because it's possible that you didn't know that you can get a decent 17-inch 1280x1024 secondary display for less than $100, or a small USB-connected display (like the Mimo UM-740 reviewed on page 91) if your videocard doesn't have multiple outputs. But next time, we're not going to be cool about it.

DISCHUB Not every game is available on Steam, so we inevitably end up with piles of game discs on our desks because we're too ~~lazy~~ busy to put them away, and after a few weeks they all appear to have been attacked by packs of feral cats. Except for the few bare discs that got tucked gently into the soft, scratchless slots of the tasteful DiscHub.
$10, www.thedischub.com

MOUSE BUNGEE If you're still using a wired mouse—and if that mouse isn't the SideWinder Mouse with the cool combo cable anchor/weight storage box—then you need the Mouse Bungee. This inexpensive and effective prophylactic against cable drag also comes with an unexpected benefit: obsessively twanging the spring with a finger is a satisfying nervous habit that drives co-workers *insane*.
$9.95, www.mousebungee.com

POWERSQUID The PowerSquid that let you plug wall-warts into every single flexible extension socket was good. Even better: The awesomely named PowerSquid Surge3000 Calamari Edition with surge protection, power filtering, and a swiveling wall plug.
$69.95, www.cableorganizer.com

NEXSTAR HARD DRIVE DOCK We've all gotten away with good excuses not to back up our stuff: DVDs don't have enough capacity, and Blu-ray and external drives are too expensive. But the NexStar HD Dock lets you pop in any spare 2.5-inch or 3.5-inch SATA hard drive and use it as a removable drive.
$39.99, www.thinkgeek.com

STEALTHSWITCH II The original StealthSwitch was a "desktop cloaking device" that instantly hid applications when you triggered the palm-sized pedal with your foot, so that your boss wouldn't know you were playing *World of WarCraft* or cooperating with the SEC. But one simple tweak—programmability—turned a clever gadget into an essential part of any gamer's loadout.

The StealthSwitch II allows you to bind *any* keystroke to the footswitch, so you can use it to take screenshots, reload weapons, activate push-to-talk in VOIP applications, launch macros, or toss a grenade while simultaneously firing a weapon and holding a beer stein. It doesn't interfere with your mouse and keyboard settings, doesn't require software to work after initial programming (take it from PC to PC tucked in your waistband!), and you can even "slave" up to four more foot-switches for ultimate seven-controller gaming fu.
$39.95 StealthSwitch II, $14.95 each add'l slave switch, www.stealthswitch2.com

RED FACTION GUERILLA

A BREAK FROM THE ORDINARY SHOOTER

/// Though it won't take advantage of PhysX tech utilized by Nvidia cards, *RFG*'s dynamic debris looks best on PC. With a few remote mines or a grenade launcher in your hand, every shack or factory feels like a Michael Bay movie waiting to happen. ///

If you place greedy children inside a chocolate factory where everything is edible, they'll eat the floors, chew the wallpaper, gnaw the leaves off every marshmallow tree and raspberry chandelier. Similarly, when a dev gives us a golden ticket to a world where everything is breakable, we just can't help ourselves: *We make cavities*, and level everything they've built. Pretty bunkers, recon outposts, propaganda billboards, innocent wind turbines, perfectly functional propane tanks—in the name of Martian terrorism, everything must explode.

MINUTES INTO OUR PLAYTEST with a 95%-complete build, we're less interested in *Red Faction: Guerrilla*'s "saving Mars from an oppressive military police force" plot than reducing the dusty world's playground to rubble. It's an open-world game that leans heavily (and ironically) on a foundation of fragile physics. You're a colonist named Mason who's well-trained in demolitions. You arrive on Mars looking for an honest job blowing things up, only to see your brother executed by the Earth Defense Force (the pseudo-military organization that's taken control). A warrant is issued against you, after which you join the Red Faction insurgency to seek revenge... Don't start drafting your fan fiction anytime soon. You'll be jamming Esc to skip this stuff to dig into what *Red Faction* excels at: destruction-driven gameplay.

Every building in *Guerrilla* has genuinely modeled weight and structural integrity, waiting to be dynamically set into motion by Mason's weapons and equipment. When enemies hop behind cover, we don't have to patiently hover our reticule above their heads until they pop up again; instead, we'd swing a sledgehammer (Mason's default weapon) to crush what they're hiding behind. Our early experiments rely on creative tactics: sticking mines to a mining truck, cracking a power plant's outer wall by ramming it at high speed, then detonating the vehicle as we sprint away from the driver seat, watching the entire facility cave in upon itself.

IT'S RECKLESS FREEDOM at its finest, and feels a little like supercop game *Crackdown* (an Xbox 360 title we wish had made it onto PC). Mars' valleys and craters are dotted with stations and facilities controlled by the EDF. Leveling key structures will advance the story to the next chapter (and boost the morale of the colonists), but many of them are totally optional. That allowed us to set the pace of mission progression ourselves—a real plus that delivers a satisfying sense of spontaneity. Pass a set of smokestacks or solar power panels on the way back from a mission in your four-wheeler, and you're free to attack it (or not) however impulsively, creatively, or tactically you choose. Maybe you'll jog around to the back of the facility and hammer through a fence to avoid the guard at the front gate; maybe you've earned enough salvage points (*Guerrilla*'s in-game currency) to unlock the jetpack, and you'll float up to the cliff overlooking the roof and spray your grenade launcher until there's nothing left standing; maybe you don't mind having a few assault rifles in your grill, and you'll roll a bulldozer right through the front door, sprinkle remote mines on support beams, and retreat to blow the place from a safe distance.

Lead Designer James Hague knows these kinds of emergent war stories first-hand. "One tester put charges all over a vehicle, then he got the walker [a bipedal construction mech] and he threw the vehicle like 300 meters and detonated when it hit the building. So he'd *invented artillery*. And the planes in the game, the EDF gunships? We've seen cases where people are timing shooting the wings on the planes, hoping it'll spiral down and hit stuff. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad. I've had planes crash on the safehouse."

Volition says a quick run through the game might last 20 hours, but it's these player-created moments that we expect to extend the experience. Sure, 16-player multiplayer is nice (with an attack/defend siege mode where defenders can repair structures, and a party game that has players competing to destroy more efficiently), the driving feels off-roady and effortless, there are some neat unlockable weapons—but we could see that stuff in any third-person shooter. *Guerrilla*, on the other hand, recalls our youth, when Jenga and Legos taught us the inherent fun of watching the bits and layers of support beams cave, collide, and tumble down. Volition simply needs to put its pretty tech to work: stack up enough well-designed bases and encounters for players to Jenga to the ground, and we'll be happy. EVAN LAHTI

VITALS // **DEVELOPER:** VOLITION **PUBLISHER:** THQ
RELEASE DATE: JUNE **URL:** COMMUNITY.REDFACTION.COM

BIG STUFF TO BREAK

SKYSCRAPER SKELETONS These tender building bones are still under construction. Jetpack to the top.

BADLANDS BRIDGE The aorta of Mars' industrial region. If remote mines won't dent it, what will?

TOWN HALL Walled-up with roadblocks. Taking pot shots from the cliff flanking the facility is your best bet.

APARTMENTS Remember when you dropped your goblet at a wine tasting party? Take revenge on glass' fragility.

THE IDEA MACHINE

THE PC IS STILL AT THE FOREFRONT OF GAMING DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION, SAYS POPCAP GAMES' ED ALLARD

VITALS

NAME: Edward Allard

TITLE: VP, Strategic Development, PopCap Games

FAVORITE POPCAP GAME: *Plants vs. Zombies*

FAVORITE MATH EQUATION: F=ma (where would *Peggle* be without it?)

FIRST GAME PROJECT: Text adventures in BASIC on a TRS-80 Color Computer

In the last few years, gaming has grown as an entertainment form for the masses. Our hobby is no longer reserved for us old-timers with the patience for 8 GB game installs and the savvy tech-heads that devote a weekend to updating drivers. Mainstream gamers still have PCs in their homes, but they're also enamored with their console-connected 50" HDTVs, netbooks, Facebook accounts, and $0.99 iPhone games.

As the game industry shifts to meet the needs of these new customers, there's been all kinds of argument and debate about the death of the PC gaming. To be honest, these arguments strike me as sensationalist and not very productive. What's more interesting to consider is what role the PC does and will play in this new, ever-evolving gaming landscape. As I see it, the PC has evolved from a narrowly focused, monolithic gaming platform into a highly dynamic, broad-reaching sketchpad for the entire industry—where new ideas are tried, tested, fed, and given life.

The PC has a couple things going for it that cement its role as a crucial platform in digital entertainment. PCs are dynamic platforms—far more so than any video game console or consumer electronic device out there. Digital distribution and browser-based experiences mean that the PC as a platform is always changing to adapt to new consumer trends and business models. Compare this to the console platforms, which can have life cycles of about five years and standards that are, by their very nature, slow to change.

THIS MALLEABILITY MAKES the PC a perfect place for new types of play to be born and presented to the hungry masses. The explosion of casual games, free-to-play MMOs, skill-based gaming, microtransactions, ad-supported gaming, "book of the month club" subscription services, and addictive viral games on social networks are all examples of businesses that could never have taken off under the tight constraints and slow timelines of the console business.

The second thing the PC has going for it is ubiquity. Not only are PCs everywhere, but pretty much everyone knows what to do with one. This gives designers a baseline from which to build. At PopCap, we design games that you can play with only a mouse and a single mouse button. Why? Because everyone instantly knows how to play them. Every single console out there (and most consumer electronic devices) has a steeper learning curve for the user, and that's why the PC is where all PopCap's ideas get their start.

The existence of low-cost (often free) development tools means the PC is still the most accessible and powerful platform for developing new ideas. If you look at the best stuff coming out of the vibrant indie game scene, most of them got their start as PC games. It's cheaper and easier to iterate on the PC, and iteration is a vital component to building great ideas. At PopCap right now, we're using the PC to try out new multiplayer modes for some of our upcoming console products—it's a great sketchpad for these ideas and allows us to be a lot more nimble than working directly on the console.

So while the PC game section in our local game store might be shrinking, if we pick our heads up and look around at all the exciting things going on in the world of gaming, it's clear that our old friend the PC is a vital platform at the forefront of some of the most interesting new trends and ideas in digital entertainment.

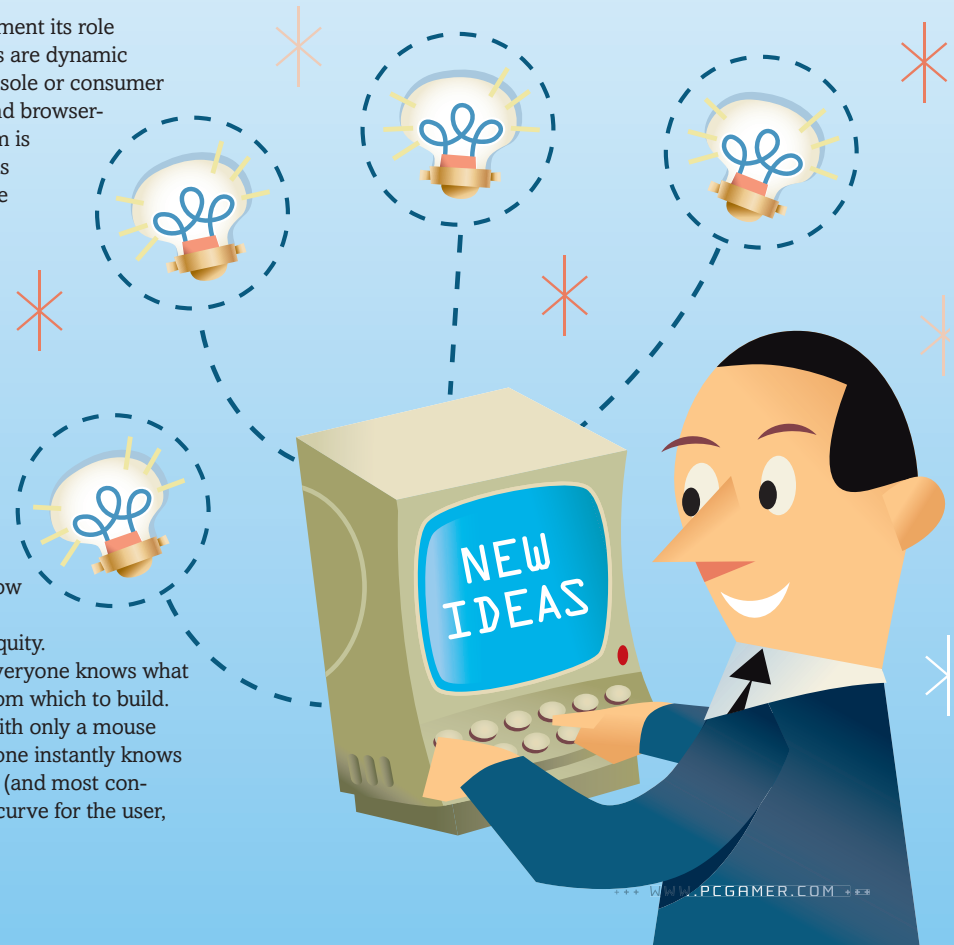


ILLUSTRATION BY ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/RUSSELLTATEDOTCOM

ROLE REVERSAL

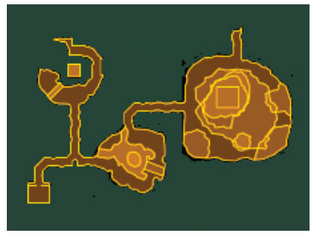
NOW *YOU* CAN CREATE AND PUBLISH YOUR OWN *CITY OF HEROES* MISSIONS

You know that recurring dream you have of making a game level based on your high school with the final boss being a giant space slug named after that awful math teacher who shouts something like, "More homework, I hate happiness!" (Or is that just me?) Now, you and your friends can live out that fantasy in a major MMO thanks to *City of Heroes*' new Mission Architect tool.

/// Weapon-wielding brain cravers or angry test subjects for night-vision implants? Put your own twist on the game's models and environments. ///

As the name so aptly suggests, the Mission Architect lets you create missions that you can test privately, then publish online for others to play. With *Champions Online* and *DC Universe Online* both about to crowd the superhero MMO subgenre, the aging *City of Heroes* needed something new to invigorate its world, and this focus on player-created content is shaping up to be one of the most exciting additions to an MMO in recent memory.

Just about everything can be customized—from the mission environment and objectives to the types of enemies and their scripting—yet Cryptic somehow managed to fit it all into three elegant screens that make creating a mission from scratch much less daunting than you'd imagine. By reusing existing enemy groups and going light on the fluff text, I was able to create and publish a mission in less than five minutes. Of course a more dedicated player could easily spend hours designing unique enemies and bosses around intriguing plots, writing witty dialogue and using the modest scripting tools to create memorable moments.



/// Somewhere in this maze I've hidden a hot dog zealously guarded by the undead. Who is brave enough to find (and eat) it? ///

/// All Hungry Hobo ever wanted was to dance to his boombox and eat hobo stew, but then the zombies came. ///

DESPITE HOW ROBUST

it is, a few obvious features are missing from the Mission Architect. First, there's no way to create a new layout or environment; you must choose from existing office buildings, caves, lairs, whatever—so recreating specific locations like that school of yours is out. Second, due to exploit concerns, the specific spawn locations and attacks used by the NPCs are beyond your control, meaning combat will be pretty standard.

Even without those features, there's still plenty of depth to reward those willing to invest time and creativity into crafting an epic story arc. While quickie missions like mine (I think the vague plot had something to do with hot dogs and zombies) generate decent grind environments, the lack of polish or intriguing story guarantees it a spot at the bottom of the player ranking list.

And that's where the true genius of the Mission Architect tool comes into play. Because anyone with half a finger and five minutes can publish a mission, Cryptic made sure that players are able to find the best missions without having to wade through the inevitable slew of sloppy, uninspired grindfests. Their solution is a criteria-based search function and a five-star rating and feedback system that captures the highest rated games in a Hall of Fame for players to easily access. Cryptic will also have a Developer's Choice section to highlight their favorites as well.

Creating a great mission won't just earn you accolades from other players. Anytime someone completes your mission and gives it a favorable rating, you'll receive tickets that can be used to unlock new environments or NPCs to use in your future missions. Players that try out others' missions will recieve full XP in addition to tickets that can be used to purchase loot, making *City of Heroes* the first MMO to let you level entirely on user-created content with the added benefit of not having to waste time traveling—all player-created content will be directly accessible from any Architect Entertainment building located throughout the world. JOSH AUGUSTINE

INTERN ABUSE

with Josh Augustine

In the name of science, we force-feed Harcos' latest energy potions aimed at gamers to our unsuspecting intern and observe the results.

/// This tiny shot has as much caffeine as 2 Red Bulls or 4 cups of coffee. ///

9:05a.m.
Brown sack placed over head of subject as he exits the elevator, moved to secret PCG interrogation lab.

9:15a.m.
Subject "persuaded" by Gary to drink the first Mana Potion, still shuddering from the harsh taste 15 minutes later.

10:00a.m.
Moderate increase in energy level observed as Josh sets a new PvP kill record in *WoW*; occasional involuntary foot bouncing.

10:30a.m.
Reflexes slowing; gets killed by lower-level character. Desperately downs a Health Potion to regain his honor, appears to help slightly.

12.30p.m.
Second Health Potion. Subject complains taste is closer to multivitamins than cinnamon apple; reports a hazy, jittery feeling.

1:00p.m.
After three potions, Josh is cut off and braces for a crash that never comes, but continues to feel groggy the rest of the day.

NO REGRETS

Despite the sabotage and scandals within *EVE Online*, Lead Developer NOAH WARD has a clear conscience

PCG: Every few months it seems a story comes out of *EVE* about a big sabotage scandal or the overthrowing of a major corporation. Had you always planned for *EVE* to be so focused on emergent gameplay?

/// Mirial's entire corporation was dismantled by one traitorous 2ic. ///

NOAH: That was definitely our design goal at the beginning. Use a few procedural equations to grow a universe the way that crystals grow, and then put the players in and let them be the content. We are always surprised by the players, but in a good way. It's like when your kids do something really interesting. What we try to do is embrace that and extend the game for them. Having the single shard, just one server, is key.

Do you have any plans for player-created quests or missions?
Well, the current contract system lets players create simple contracts like "mine this much minerals and you'll get this ship," but once walking in stations is implemented, you'll be able to put NPCs in your establishments and customize their conversation trees. The sky's the limit once we introduce that.

Do you regret permitting players to sabotage, betray, and otherwise work to undermine other players in the game?
We don't condone real-life griefing—racial slurs aren't allowed—but things like social engineering and scamming…it's a gritty universe. At the end of the day it's a game, and if big, bad stuff happens to you, you were still part of this history. And I think even if you were crushed initially, you will look back on it fondly and think, "Wow, it was amazing what could happen in that game." I don't have any regrets.

PATCH OF THE LICH KING

WITH THE FIRST MAJOR UPDATE OUT, WE READ THE FULL 8,000-WORD NOTES SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO

It doesn't matter what class you play or how hardcore or casual you think you are: Patch 3.1 is a big deal. But it's not a big deal if you haven't devoted an entire weekend to reading each of the 50 gazillion changes the patch makes—that's what interns are for. But in case you don't have your own personal intern, we're happy to share what ours has learned with you, our bestest friends in the whole wide world (of *Warcraft*). JOSH AUGUSTINE

SPLIT PERSONALITIES

Even if you hate all the other changes on this page, you should be excited about patch 3.1 solely because of dual talent specializations. Blizzard is answering players' prayers by giving anyone over level 40 the ability to freely switch between two talent specializations anytime they want. The transition is hassle-free: Your macros, action bars, and glyphs switch with your talent specialization. The one-time setup fee of 1,000 gold is pocket change for most level 80s in Northrend and a small price to pay for a permanent solution to the tank and healer shortages currently plaguing most realms. That means less waiting for a healer or tank to log on—and more killing, which can only be a good thing!

RAIDERS REJOICE

In ancient times, the creator Titans faced an evil so great that they could not destroy it, so they constructed a prison called Ulduar to contain it. Naturally, you and your tiny mortal friends are going to break into that prison and do what several near-omnipotent Titans could not: Kill the Old God of death. Heralded as the first *WotLK* dungeon with a "truly epic scope," Ulduar boasts an impressive 14 (mostly gigantic) bosses and two distinct sections; the first introduces siege weapons into a raid for the first time, as players must smash their way through a massive army defending the gates before gaining access to the bosses.

What Does It Mean For *You*?

Massive class changes reduced to seven words each

DEATH KNIGHT Nerfed burst damage; dual-wield is dead

DRUID Trees lose mana; Kitties and Boomkins happy!

HUNTER More powerful pets; easier to manage ammo

MAGE ▶ Your new armor's a cyclops chicken mech

PALADIN BoK trainable; condensed talents in Protection tree

PRIEST Shadow Priests now melt more faces, faster!

ROGUE Less hassle with some abilities, nothing big

SHAMAN Enhancement can now root enemies from range

WARLOCK Easier soul shards; great new PvP glyphs

WARRIOR New Shattering Throw removes invulnerabilities on enemies

TIER 8 ARMOR SETS

Fancy lore and huge bosses are fine and dandy, but if there's no new loot what's the point? Thankfully, Ulduar brings a brand new set of unique-looking gear for each class. The gritty, almost sci-fi look of the new armor is fantastic, although Gnomes continue to look silly in just about anything.

NEW ARENA SEASON

As usual, the start of the 6th arena season will reset the rankings ladder and introduce another tier of PvP gear for players to earn. Unlike previous seasons, Blizzard will start arena teams at a much lower rating than they have in the past (1500), forcing all players to climb the ladder before having access to the new gear.

The MMO Times-Picayune

"Hey dude, long time no see! Anyways..."

Remember your "real life" friends? Well, good thing you've stayed in touch (right?) because they're about to come in handy if you're

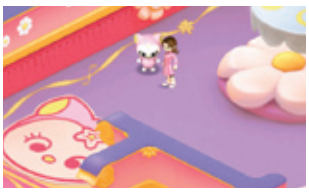
playing *Warhammer Online*. To complement its new trial-account program, players who refer friends to the game will receive exclusive in-game items including pets and XP boosters in addition to the usual free play time.

A Long Time Coming

In honor of *Everquest*'s tenth year running and "the continued support and dedication SOE shows to the city and community of San Diego," March 14 was officially declared "Sony Online Entertainment Day" in San Diego, California.

One of These Things Is Not Like the Others

After years at Turbine working on titles like *Asheron's Call*, *Dungeons & Dragons Online*, and *Lord of the Rings Online*, Robert Ferrari embraced his inner child, accepting



a vice president position at *Hello Kitty Online*'s developer. Can fuzzy pink axes be far behind?

The Black Market of New Eden

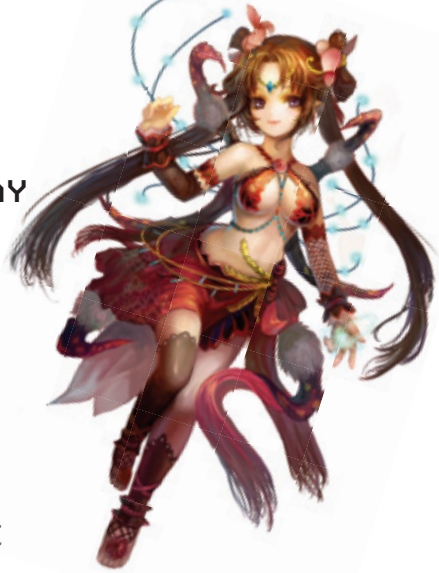
CCP is actively looking for new ways to encourage the trade of "boosters," *EVE Online*'s illegal drug equivalent, further increasing the game's reputation as a dark and gritty universe.

China Turns Down Wrath of the Lich King

China's harsh censorship laws continue to delay the release of *WoW*'s new expansion in that country despite the removal of the Death Knight hero class from the most recently proposed version. Skeleton characters and "a city raid" have been cited as the offending content.

ETHER SAGA ONLINE

DON'T LET THE FRILLY FAIRY SCARE YOU AWAY



Whisper the word cute to some hardcore PC gamers and you're likely to see a small shudder. Mention the term free-to-play, and that same gamer might recoil from his gaming rig as if it were infected by a new kind of virus that can punch right through the monitor and knock your teeth into the back of your neck. And that's for good reason—the majority of free-to-play MMOs are syrupy sweet affairs aimed solely at getting you to pony up real cash for some daisy-strewn necklace made of kitten fluff. That said, *Ether Saga Online*—the new game from Perfect World Entertainment, released in April—is shaping up to be one the few free-to-play MMOs that prove you can have a great time without paying for a monthly subscription. After spending some time in the closed beta, we came away impressed. Here are three reasons why:

/// Pets range from silly to saccharine—gotta catch 'em all! ///

1. Killing quest mobs is a lot more fun than trying to find quest mobs, so *ESO*'s quests include links that automatically navigate your character to each objective location. Over bridges, around buildings, up stairs—you're free to do all the quest mob drive-bys you want thanks to this personal chauffeur.

2. You don't have to go it alone. Every player starts with one pet, which has its own stats, gear, and trained abilities. There are currently 112 others to capture, with plans to add hundreds more. If you're not into catch-and-release, killing a monster gives you a chance to collect its "monster card," which lets you morph into that monster's shape (although you still use your own abilities). Transforming your character lets you use the rock-paper-scissors combat bonuses to your advantage, shifting to forms that your enemies are weak against. You can even go one step further and meld two of your pets together to create a squirrel-dragon abomination or fuse your character with a pet to gain access to unique powers and gameplay options.

3. At launch, *ESO*'s game world is two-thirds the size of *WoW*'s Azeroth, has nine different crafting and gathering professions, 16 quest types (including puzzle), over 12,000 quests, dungeons and six-person raids, and even mounted combat. Not too shabby for a free game. Of course you can always purchase cosmetic upgrades or leveling helpers like teleportation scrolls from the Cash Shop, but it's almost too easy to enjoy the game without them.

TABULA RASA The world ends with a whimper and a bang

At midnight CST on February 28, 2009, an entire universe disappeared—but it's not all bad news. As far as apocalypses go, *Tabula Rasa* offered a pretty decent sendoff, with players staying to the bitter end to defend New York from a massive alien invasion. We were there when it all went down, but since MMOs are all about the community, we'll get out of the way to let the players have the final word.

"There is no 'after this'"

"make this game free"

You gained a level! You are now level 50.
[GMs leveled players to max level for fun]

"I'm gonna cry"

"this is stupid"

"It was an honor serving with you all"

"BYE"
[Flasheart, the last person to ever speak in TR]

"Selling TR credits cheap!!"

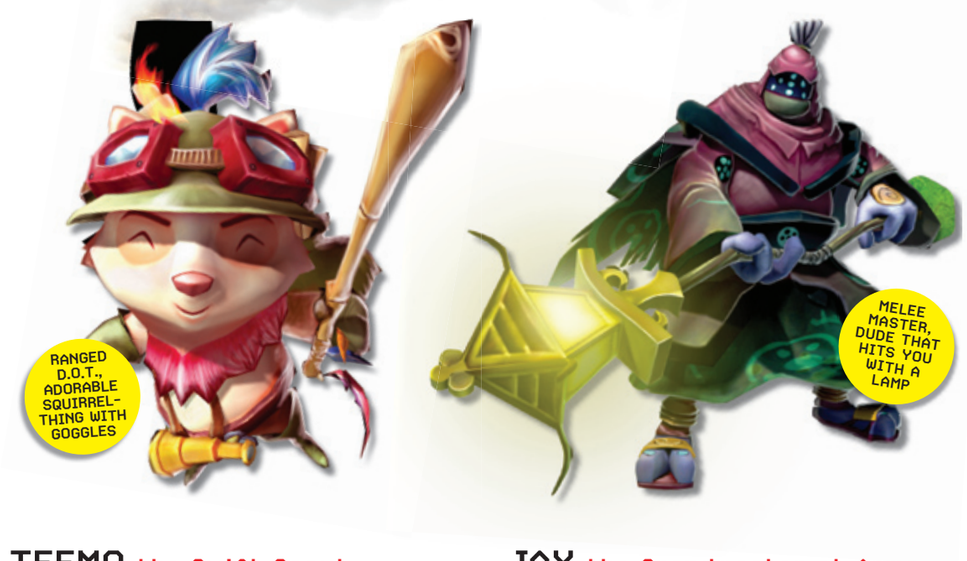
League of Legends
CLASH OF FATES

AN EXCLUSIVE REVEAL OF TWO CHAMPIONS FROM THE UPCOMING *DOTA* SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR

VITALS
DEVELOPER: RIOT GAMES
PUBLISHER: RIOT GAMES
RELEASE: TBA 2009
URL: LEAGUEOFLEGENDS.COM

The 60-second summary

If *LoL's* session-based fantasy multiplayer isn't familiar, you might've missed *Defense of the Ancients*—maybe the least-talked-about worldwide phenomenon in PC gaming. The *Warcraft III* mod is adored by a community of millions, but it remains a narrow experience: It's not officially supported, so since its release, *DotA* has been limited to a single map, with no added modes, stat-tracking, or extra incentives for invested time. Consider *League of Legends* a full-fledged commercial game for and by *DotA* fans. Developed by a team that includes Steve Feak, the designer of the most popular variation (DotA Allstars), and Tom Cadwell, former *WCIII* play balance lead, *League* will add persistent stat-tracking, avatar creation, a range of maps, and other features to support the experience. In team-based multiplayer sessions, you control a single champion while hordes of "creeps" advance the game of attrition and players try to destroy their opposition's defense towers. It's a bit like a magical football match, and we're excited to reveal a pair of *League*'s star quarterbacks—two of the dozens of champions that will be playable when the game releases.



TEEMO the Swift Scout

In addition to his duties as Captain of the Bantam City Scouts—which include planning the soap-box derby, teaching new recruits the scout's pledge, and judging the yearly s'more-eating contest—Teemo is also responsible for the defense of the yordle homeland. In Teemo's bestselling autobiography, *Accuracy by Volume*, the leader of the Bantam City Scouts expounds on yordle military tactics, such as blow-dart carpet bombing, and filling trebuchets with poison-tipped sewing needles.

JAX the Grandmaster at Arms

The most prolific tournament fighter in the League of Legends, Jax was originally banned from the arena by the Institute of War. But after scores of petitions from his adoring fans, the Institute eventually relented, stating that a champion's skill was no reason to remove a realm's access to the governing powers of the tournaments. Jax was reinstated, but with one rule: He is only allowed to fight with weapons the Institute deems suitable. For now, that list includes a lamp post, a chicken's foot, a spatula, and a fishing rod.

TEEMO'S ABILITIES

TOXIC SHOT
Teemo sends a poisonous dart at a targeted champion, dealing damage over time every second. Teemo can stack the effects of the poison with subsequent toxic shots.

MOVE QUICK
Teemo goes into a full sprint, increasing his movement speed drastically. Should Teemo take damage while Moving Quickly, he must move slowly to recover.

SCOUT'S BOUNTY
Tracks an enemy champion for 30 seconds, causing the target to lose armor. If the target dies while being tracked, Teemo gains extra gold.

EAGLE EYE
Upgrade this skill if you want to use Teemo to run recon for your team. Teemo's sight range is increased, letting him spot enemies before they can see him.

BLINDING DART
Fires a poisonous dart that causes damage and hinders vision for a short duration, letting ranged allies get hits in.

JAX'S ABILITIES

EMPOWER
Cleaves multiple enemies in a single swing. This ability can stack where each subsequent attack adds bonus damage, cleave radius, and sight radius.

LEAP STRIKE
Lunge ambush! Jax leaps toward a single enemy target, attacking immediately and dealing bonus damage. Use it to hop into the fray.

COUNTER STRIKE
Permanently increases Jax's ability to dodge incoming attacks. On a successful dodge, Jax will stun all nearby enemies.

RELENTLESS ASSAULT
Boosts Jax's attack speed at the cost of draining mana over time. Additionally, each successful attack increases his attack speed.

WEAPON MASTERY
Jax has an incredible understanding of fishing rods—erm... weaponry; this increases his physical damage dealt through items.

THE SABOTEUR
THE WAR ON MONOCHROME

Listen, all y'all: It's conspiracy time. After reviewing our board of newspaper clippings and yarn-connected push-pins, we're 64 percent *positive* that *The Saboteur* is actually a renamed version of *Medal of Honor: Sin City Assault*, an unreleased Pandemic secret project that, according to our records, dissolved in 2005 when Jessica Alba wasn't satisfied with the anti-aliasing on her likeness' cleavage. All the signs of similarity are here: over-the-top pulpy action; mature storytelling that matches Frank Miller's *graphic* graphic masterpiece; a leading man who could easily be a palette-swapped Bruce Willis.

Of course, *The Saboteur*'s super-stylized main mechanic is the real common ground between the two pieces of art-ertainment, and it's the reason we're interested in a game that's marrying two of gaming's most overdone conventions (open-world third-person action and World War Deux) in a seemingly original way. You're Sean Devlin, Irish racecar driver turned insurgent saboteur. Devlin runs assassination and sabotage missions for the allies in occupied Paris, a setting that's burdened by the control and oppression of the Third Reich, which *The Saboteur* symbolizes by painting Paris in pure black and white. But as Devlin completes objectives, the game's initially dim monochrome will fade into color.

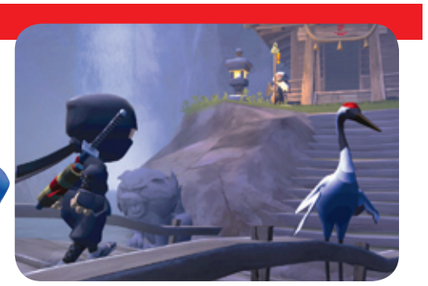
Thematically, it's a way of reinforcing Hitler's iron grip over France while measuring Devlin's agency as a character. In gameplay, these "liberated" areas will actually be safer to traverse, with fewer Nazi patrols and more civilians strolling the brick-cobbled streets. We expect the rest of the open world fare to be tailored to the game's serious tone—like the cops in *GTA*, you'll have to escape the search radius of Axis troops if you set them on alert, but Pandemic promises it won't force war-era "bowling mini-game" equivalents upon us.

It's Indiana Jones-style high fantasy throughout—one moment you're fighting on a burning Nazi zeppelin, then next you're making use of Devlin's *Prince of Persia*-like agility to scale the Eiffel tower. In the hands of a studio whose core competency is making open-world action games (*Mercenaries*, *Destroy All Humans!*, *Star Wars: Battlefront*), we're expecting good things. Whatever the outcome, we're already sold on the way the game uses color to create a living, dramatic tone for the story—it speaks to us better than how many machine guns we get to shoot, or beaches we storm. **EVAN LAHTI**

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** PANDEMIC **PUBLISHER:** EA **RELEASE:** TBA 2009 **URL:** PANDEMICSTUDIOS.COM/SABOTEUR

THE 17-WORD PREVIEW*: MINI NINJAS

Six young ninjas restore nature's balance.
Evil samurai become animals when killed.
Your hat is a boat.



*Everything you need to know about a game delivered with the precision of a ninja's shuriken strike to the brain.

WITH COLLEAGUE RON CARMEL, **KYLE GABLER** LEFT A SAFE JOB AT EA TO MAKE ***WORLD OF GOO*** IN A COFFEE SHOP.

BUBBLING TO THE TOP

IT WORKED OUT OK.

> "You don't have to have design meetings every day at 2:30 p.m. where you make schedules and debate about small things on a whiteboard."

They're usually introduced as the EA employees who rejected that company's corporate culture to do their own thing. But Kyle Gabler's name first appeared in *PC Gamer* in a very different capacity, as the founder of a superb project at Carnegie Mellon university that asks students to create a game in just one week. We spoke to him about how it all fits together, how *World of Goo* was made, and what got lost along the way. JOHN WALKER

PCG: One of the things that struck us most about the levels in *World of Goo* was they weren't just chunks of content. Each one is a concept, a mechanic, a place, and a particular mood. Was that a conscious attempt to overcome the potential repetitiveness of a building game, or just how you feel all games should be?

Kyle: I used to do one of those single panel daily comics, like *The Far Side* or *Non-Sequitur* except mine wasn't funny or well drawn. After a while, I found out that it sometimes helped to turn the comic into oblique little stories that tried to have multiple meanings. Some were more successful than others, and I don't think I ever got it just right, but the same idea carried over a few years later to *World of Goo*, a game with about 50 levels, where each one was an opportunity to do something new and naughty.

Red Carpet and Genetic Sorting Machine are the most obvious levels whose design is based around funny people or situations, things in real life. Other level designs are based around electronic privacy and government and corporate eavesdropping ("If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear!"). It just seemed more fun to base levels around funny or horrible real life situations, rather than make a level called ICE WORLD where the ground is slippery. Or EGYPT WORLD with lava. But one of the design rules for the game was to never cram the story or themes down a player's throat, so we should never speak of this again!

You've described your roles as you being the right brain of 2D Boy and Ron being the left. Are there unique advantages of doing the art, music, design, and writing yourselves, rather than with a larger team?

Maybe one advantage is you don't have to have design meetings every day at 2:30 p.m. where you make schedules and debate about small things on a whiteboard, and everyone fantasizes about one day starting a new company without design meetings.

Where do most players get stuck in *World of Goo*?

We found a lot of players got stuck on the final level of Chapter 1. Early beta testers didn't realize they could rip the eyes off the giant creature. To make the puzzle clearer, we ended up making the eyes follow your cursor and pulse slightly. It helped a lot, but some people still take a moment to realize what they need to do. I suppose ripping the eyes off of giant creatures isn't immediately intuitive for some people.

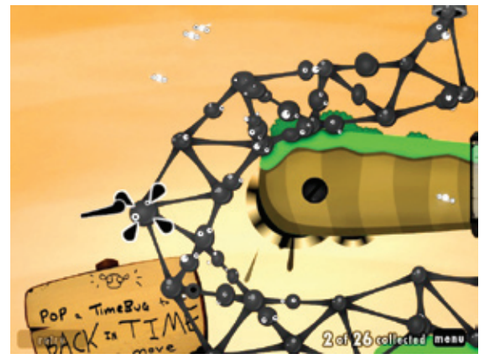
You had a funny comment about the "Are Games Art?" debate: that the whole question is a conspiracy to illegitimize the medium. Does that make games that try to be art—like Jason Rohrer's *The Passage* and Rod Humble's *The Marriage*—pointless? Or should we just call them something else?

An "art game" really wants you to know that it's "saying something." A "non-art-game" game is also fully capable of "saying something" but it won't try to tell you that's what it's doing. I went to a modern art museum recently and noticed that some of the art was trying really hard to present some kind of "meaning" without making any effort to be enjoyable. And I know art doesn't have to be enjoyable, but if the goal is to get a meaning across, it might be more effective to create a really fun, compelling, amazing game/movie/book/music/whatever that everyday people actually want to be a part of and actively seek out—and only then, once an audience is captivated, sucker punch the meaning into the audience without anyone even knowing they just experienced art! Mary Poppins taught us that a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. And you can't argue with Mary Poppins. She's practically perfect in every way.

We agree. How did *World of Goo* sell? What's next?

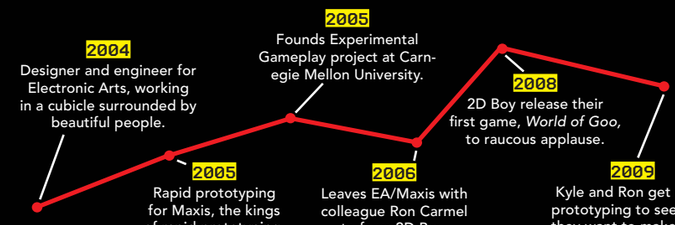
We are able to comfortably make another game, we are happy to report! Our plan is to make a bunch of prototypes really quickly. The hope is that some of the good ones will bubble to the top, and become obvious candidates for future games!

/// It looks cartoonish, but *World of Goo* has high aesthetic standards. Two-thirds of the levels Kyle and Ron created never made it into the final game. ///



KYLE'S HIGHS AND LOWS

Kyle's not as harsh about his time at Electronic Arts as you might expect—he says he just felt the culture wasn't for him. He was also disturbed by the abundance of beautiful people there. When he and Ron Carmel decided to leave, they hadn't known each other long. All they knew was that they felt the same way about what games should be, and they wanted to do something about it. Working from any coffee shop with free wireless, they took an idea they knew was fun and spent two years honing it into a truly beautiful game.



The Last REMNANT

SEE WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE FORCE OUR WoW-LOVING INTERN TO PLAY FOUR FULL HOURS OF THIS BAFFLING JRPG

When it comes to Japanese RPGs, translating dialogue is the smallest barrier to overcome when trying to reach a Western market. Some of the fundamental trends in JRPGs—turn-based combat, overlong cutscenes, and mystical elements with scarce explanation—simply don't make sense to PC gamers like me who've had almost no exposure to the genre. And that's probably why bossman Gary told me to play through the first 240 minutes of Square Enix's newest release (their first game to hit the PC in a very long time), jot down my unfiltered notes, and share them with our readers. "Why me?" I couldn't help but wonder aloud as I surreptitiously quit out of another marathon *WoW* session. "Because it amuses me," he grunted. Here's hoping you're all just as amused by this as Gary was. JOSH AUGUSTINE

/// Pelvic thrusts: perfect for making a point. ///

/// So many details...but none of it matters! ///

00:00 Just launched *The Last Remnant;* feeling a bit nervous. Is that a guy or a girl on the loading screen?

00:01 Bad sign: My mouse doesn't work in the menus and all the commands are Xbox buttons. Time to bust out the gamepad.

00:05 My character was staring at a butterfly sitting on some flowers and now he's suddenly sprinting away. Was it a killer robotic butterfly? Ends up he was running toward a big army of weird animal races. I think they're supposed to be the bad guys, but half of them are actually kind of... adorable.

00:10 OK, I think some of the adorable guys are on my side and so is a giant fishman and a cat person with four arms. Furries are go!

00:13 This monstrous combat UI covers over half the screen! I can barely even see the characters beneath it, yet I'm only able to choose to attack with "combat arts" or "mystic arts."

00:17 Okay, wtf? There's a guy on my side (I hope) with a gun that can control some kind of giant floating cannon that instantly destroyed the entire army? Why didn't we use that earlier???

00:35 Almost 20 minutes of video and I've barely touched the gamepad...

00:50 Finally free to roam the big city...for five feet until a loading screen prepares another 20 yards of uninteractive environment to look at. *Ugh.*

01:25 Young street rat in a desert city goes on a grand adventure after a girl while annoying the noble elite with his uncouth style and charm. Oh I get it—it's *Aladdin*! I hope Robin Williams shows up.

02:05 I encounter a fork in the road—my first chance to make a real decision in the game.

02:06 The road to the left dead-ends after 20 yards, so it wasn't much of a choice.

02:10 Of course the cave is filled with little schoolgirls being traded as sex slaves.

02:45 Purchased an awesome katana. There's a lot of cool stuff happening in combat, I just have very little to do with it.

02:52 Ridiculous. Rush just did a pelvic thrust to emphasize his point to the king.

03:35 With arms behind my head, leaning back in my chair, and the gamepad on my leg, I'm defeating enemies in combat. The game's world is beginning to feel a bit more open.

04:00 Oh no, long cinematic incoming! Pause it while I go microwave some popcorn.

ZENO CLASH

CAVEPUNK COMBAT, CHILEAN-STYLE

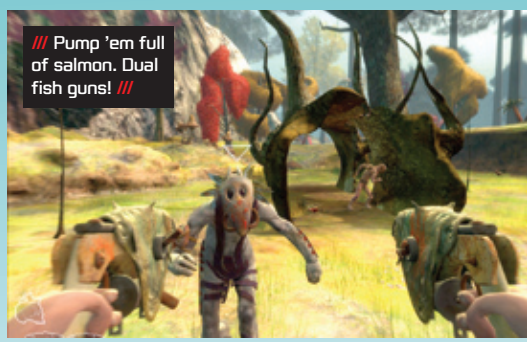
After its release as a video game, we're confident *Zeno Clash* will emerge as the next big reality TV series. The plot isn't far off from standard MTV-fare: You are a human child of Father-Mother, the hermaphroditic leader of a large clan of bizarre children. For reasons unclear, you've attempted (and failed) to kill him/her, and you're now being hunted by your siblings, Father-Mother's brood of anthropomorphic pig-men, parrot-men, six-breasted rat men, and ladies (we suspect this resembles Flava Flav's homelife).

Punching ensues, and also kicking. *Zeno Clash* is a first-person brawler with an emphasis on intimate violence. An early scene has you trapped on a bridge, waiting for your sister (the only sibling who doesn't hate you) to open a gate and aid your escape. Until she gets it open, you have to fight three of the siblings who *do* despise you (pictured below). As they make their entrance, the game whirls into slow-motion while life bars and stylish profile pictures fly in from the sides of the screen. Versus! It feels a little *Street Fighter*-ish and a little cinematic, but it's all in first-person and one of those guys is a parrot.

By locking onto one of your opponents, you're able to easily circle-strafe. Then, with a mixture of weapon swings, quick punches, and finishing moves (and, for the frail and frightened—blocking and dodging), you pummel away until their health bars are dry. Simple stuff, but with enough combos and physics to make it highly satisfying. Connect with a few punches in quick succession and your opponent will be dazed: You can then knock them into bigger enemies, or just pound their face against your knee repeatedly.

In other words, come for the goggle-eyed dinosaurs with the snuffleupagus trunk, but stay for kicking cro-magnons' angry, ugly faces while they're down. The few weapons are odd in design, but typical in function. Snipe with twin "fish" pistols, or a musket made of bone to shoot a man standing atop the head of one of those dinosaurs. A man who is throwing squirrels at you. Squirrels with parachutes, strapped to explosives.

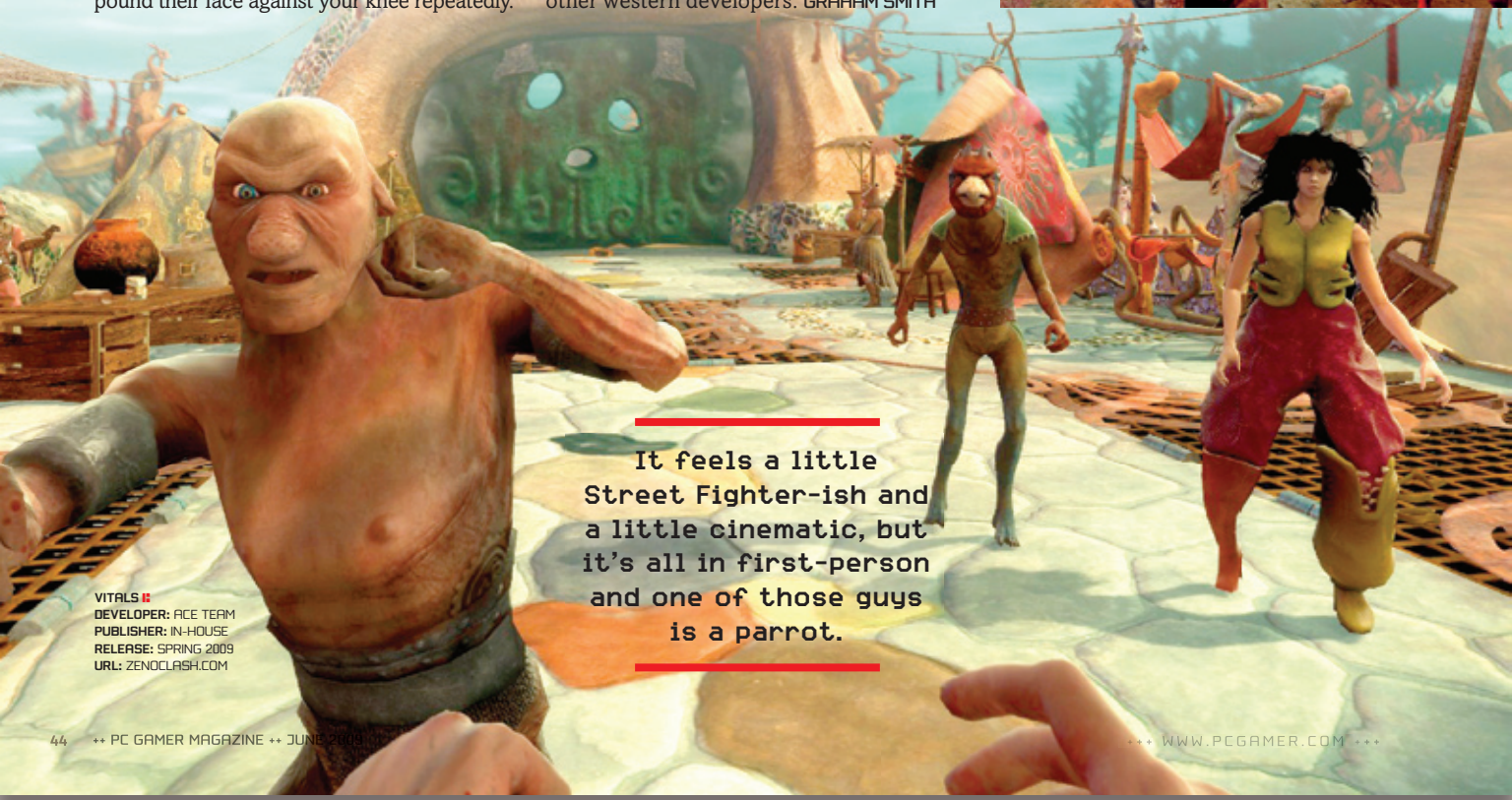
IF YOU'D LIKE TO suggest therapy to the minds behind this project, you'd have to travel all the way to Chile. An indie dev that's previously worked on a number of mods for *Doom 2* and *Quake III,* ACE Team is headed up by the brothers Andres, Carlos, and Edmundo Bordeu; the trio is responsible for nearly all of *Zeno Clash*'s game design, level creation, art direction, sound, and animation. Given the game's focus on sibling rivalry, we're curious about their working relationship, but it's not hard to imagine that *Zeno*'s extreme and distinct style is a result of a close-knit team, independence, and distance from other western developers. GRAHAM SMITH



/// Pump 'em full of salmon. Dual fish guns! ///

/// Squirrel bombs parachute from these perches. ///

/// Back in the vault, Dumbo! ///



It feels a little Street Fighter-ish and a little cinematic, but it's all in first-person and one of those guys is a parrot.

VITALS
DEVELOPER: ACE TEAM
PUBLISHER: IN-HOUSE
RELEASE: SPRING 2009
URL: ZENOCLASH.COM

/// We look forward to boots and flip-flops in the expansion pack. ///

IT'S A MAD WORLD

NEWS GAMES OFFER RELIEF FROM DREARY CURRENT EVENTS

Sometimes the world is so dire, bizarre, or infuriating that it takes a game to expose it, mock it, or tell it to go to hell.

A community of rapid-response developers nail these issues in interactive form. In fact, "community" is too small a term—this is a global phenomenon, producing works that range from passionate protests to lolsome Flash shorts.

What's interesting is to see games used as a form of expression, to communicate ideas or fulfill fantasies. Many people would've enjoyed the chance to toss their shoes at George W. Bush. Others are fed up with the AIG executives and their role in the bailout scandal. Simple games now require so little time and expertise to produce that they can be the perfect outlet for these feelings.

BUSH GAME

The tabloids called him the shoe-icide bomber, and we don't like it when they come up with better puns than us. In "Bush Game," by a mysterious new website called PopJam, you get to play as the Iraqi journalist who threw both his shoes at then-president Bush. It's tricky to hit the quick-ducking ex-president, and so it should be: In reality, both shoes were deftly dodged. It may have been his finest hour.

www.aksalser.com/game.htm

DEMOCRACY 2

No bedroom-coded Flash offering, this. *Democracy 2* is a proper game—a sequel no less—by U.K.-based Positech Games, which models the awkward tensions of governance and policy with impressive sophistication. Positech Games' Cliff Harris recently made a public offer of a free copy of the full version of *Democracy 2* to any politician in the world who cares to try their hand at it, so that they can: "make your policy errors in a game, rather than making them for real..." So far, there's no word on any takers.

snipurl.com/9l01i

MAMA KILLS ANIMALS

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) takes a keen interest in gaming as a place to promote their strongly anti-meat, anti-cruelty agenda. This is a gruesome parody of the Nintendo DS cooking sim, presenting a cartoon version of the grisly realities of slaughtering and gutting animals for meat. PETA recently named *Fable 2* their animal-friendly game of 2008—one wonders if they're aware of the achievements that require the player to "Kill a sweet, innocent, fluffy bunny rabbit" or "Kick a chicken a respectable distance."

www.peta.org/cooking-mama

AIG EXECUTIVE UFO CATCHER

Insurance giant AIG didn't make many friends when news broke of their executives spending half a million dollars on luxury retreats and hunting trips—immediately after they'd received an emergency bailout from the government. Director and animator Joaquin Baldwin was so unimpressed that he created a game that lets you use a steel claw to crush, dismember, and mutilate them, mid-romp. Satisfying.

snipurl.com/9l02r

release meter

WHAT YOU'LL BE PLAYING 0609

April showers bring May flowers, and flowers are the harbingers of doom for those of us with allergies. If you've got sensitive sinuses, barricade yourself indoors to wait out the pollen bombardment and strike back with some retaliatory floral abuse of your own by gunning down trees with *Red Faction: Guerilla's* destructible terrain system, committing vehicular plantslaughter in *FUEL*, or simply "forgetting" to water the houseplants in *Sims 3.*

—Josh the Intern

Q2 2009

Champions Online	2K
Arma II	505 Games
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	Activision
Ghostbusters: The Video Game	Atari
Bionic Commando	Capcom
Dark Void	Capcom
Street Fighter IV	Capcom
FUEL	Codemasters
Jumpgate Evolution	Codemasters
Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising	Codemasters
Overlord II	Codemasters
Battlefield Heroes	EA
Battlefield: 1943	EA
Sims 3	EA
Divinity 2	Ego Draconis
Battlestations: Pacific	Eidos
Blood Bowl	Focus Home Interactive
Terminator Salvation	Warner Bros.
Cities XL	Monte Cristo
Two Worlds: The Temptation	SouthPeak
Red Faction: Guerilla	THQ
Anno 1404	Ubisoft
America's Army 3	U.S. Army

Q3 2009

Ride to Hell	Deep Silver
Machinarium	Amanita Design
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Dragon Age: Origins	EA
Batman: Arkham Asylum	Eidos
Section 8	SouthPeak
Prototype	Sierra
Edge of Twilight	SouthPeak
Hearts of Iron III	Paradox
CrimeCraft	Vogster

Q4 2009

BioShock 2	2K
Borderlands	2K
Mafia II	2K
Global Agenda	Hi-Rez
Metro 2033	THQ

BORDERLANDS

IT RISKED BEING LOST IN THE CROWD...

...BUT NOW THIS ROLE-PLAYING SHOOTER WILL TURN HEADS

BY DAN STAPLETON

“I was ready to shut them the hell down.”

Gearbox CEO and co-founder Randy Pitchford is recalling his reaction to learning that the team working on *Borderlands* had, three weeks prior, decided to make a major change to the look of the game after *three years* of development.

“Of course my expectation was that I’m going to hate it, this is a horrible decision, this is just going to add tremendous risk to the project, and why would anyone even think of this. But then, when I saw it, I was like, ‘Holy crap, you did it!’ This is an ugly world, and somehow they found a way to make it beautiful.”

Back in August 2007, *Borderlands* was announced with screenshots showing exactly the gray-and-brown color palette you’d expect from an Unreal Engine 3-powered, realistic, gritty shooter set on an inhospitable alien world. It was technically up-to-date and lived up to the expectations of the many gamers that have blasted through similar settings, but it was also well-worn visual territory. As the pieces started falling into place, the team increasingly feared the game’s art, which had looked so amazing in their concept drawings, failed to stand out as something unique. Rather than staying the course and hoping for the best, Art Director and Gearbox co-founder Brian Martel and Technical Art Director Brian Cousins decided to make a risky and ambitious late-game change: They threw out the realistic visual style and invented a new one. They call it Concept Style, a “realized three-dimensional concept-art look” that’s so close to the concept drawings posted around Gearbox’s Plano, Texas, offices that some screenshots can easily be mistaken for an artist’s paintings at first glance.

The new technique uses hand-drawn textures, scanned in and colored in Photoshop, combined with software that draws graphic novel-style outlines around characters and objects, sharpens shadows to look more like something an artist might create, and even draws lines on terrain like hills and inclines when viewed at certain angles and distances. Finally, the character models were all revamped with more exaggerated proportions, creating the appearance of a detailed comic book in motion.

Martel cites *Tank Girl* artist and animator Jamie Hewlett as a source of inspiration for the new style. “One of the things that inspired us a lot was the Gorillaz music videos,” he says. “It’s got that really hip quality to it. It’s edgy. If you’ve seen any of their videos, I think there’s a quality to the look and feel of their character design that’s not kiddie.”

“It was pretty ballsy,” Martel says of the decision to move to the new style. “We knew that we needed to make a decision that would help the game. We had this rich world, and I didn’t feel like the ultra-realistic look was doing it. And the concept art really had a feel to it. It was like, ‘Look, if we do this, it will look different, it will look cool, it’s a broad-stroke ballsy move.’ And that’s really what was the impetus for it.”

“We thought it would be awesome, is what it comes down to,” adds Cousins.

After being wowed by the demonstration, Pitchford is totally on board with Concept Style. “Everything starts with concepts. It’s like when you see a concept car, and the concept car is awesome. It’s the coolest thing in the world. But then what happens is, the concept car gets passed through all kinds of people who are worried about it, and they boil it down, and eventually you get...a Ford. And it’s like, what happened to that awesome concept car? Well, we were doing the same thing. And you know there are a lot of games that kinda look alike, and everybody’s going for this gritty photo-realism, and there’s some games where that’s very appropriate. But we loved our concepts, and so we decided to take the risk to see if we could realize that.”

By all appearances, Gearbox has done exactly that: *Borderlands* now has a unique visual style to complement its gameplay, which is also shaping up nicely…

/// The artistic textures make you want to get dangerously close. ///

Old vs. New

If *Borderlands* had a mother, she wouldn’t recognize her own child after the new art style revamp. Looking at the old textures and models from last year side-by-side with the new versions below shows exactly how amazing the transformation was.

/// A typical wall. You’ve seen this a hundred times before. ///

/// Now even a wall makes you stop and admire the art. ///

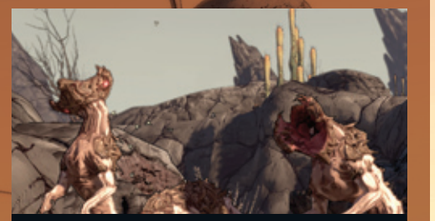
/// A washing machine, just like the one you ignore at home. ///

/// This is a *Borderlands* washing machine—no mistaking it. ///

/// Play as generic hooded character #7152! ///

/// Play as Mordecai, badass comic-book action hero. ///

/// See that gun? It's one of thousands of unique weapons in *Borderlands*. Kill the bandit and it's yours. ///



/// Skags come in many shapes and sizes, from "Easy kill" to "Oh god it's eating my face." ///

/// Pandora is the Old West meets *Mad Max*. ///

Border Patrol

PLAYTEST ON PLANET PANDORA

Pandora's unique look may make it a sightseeing attraction, but this time I wasn't here to take in the view.

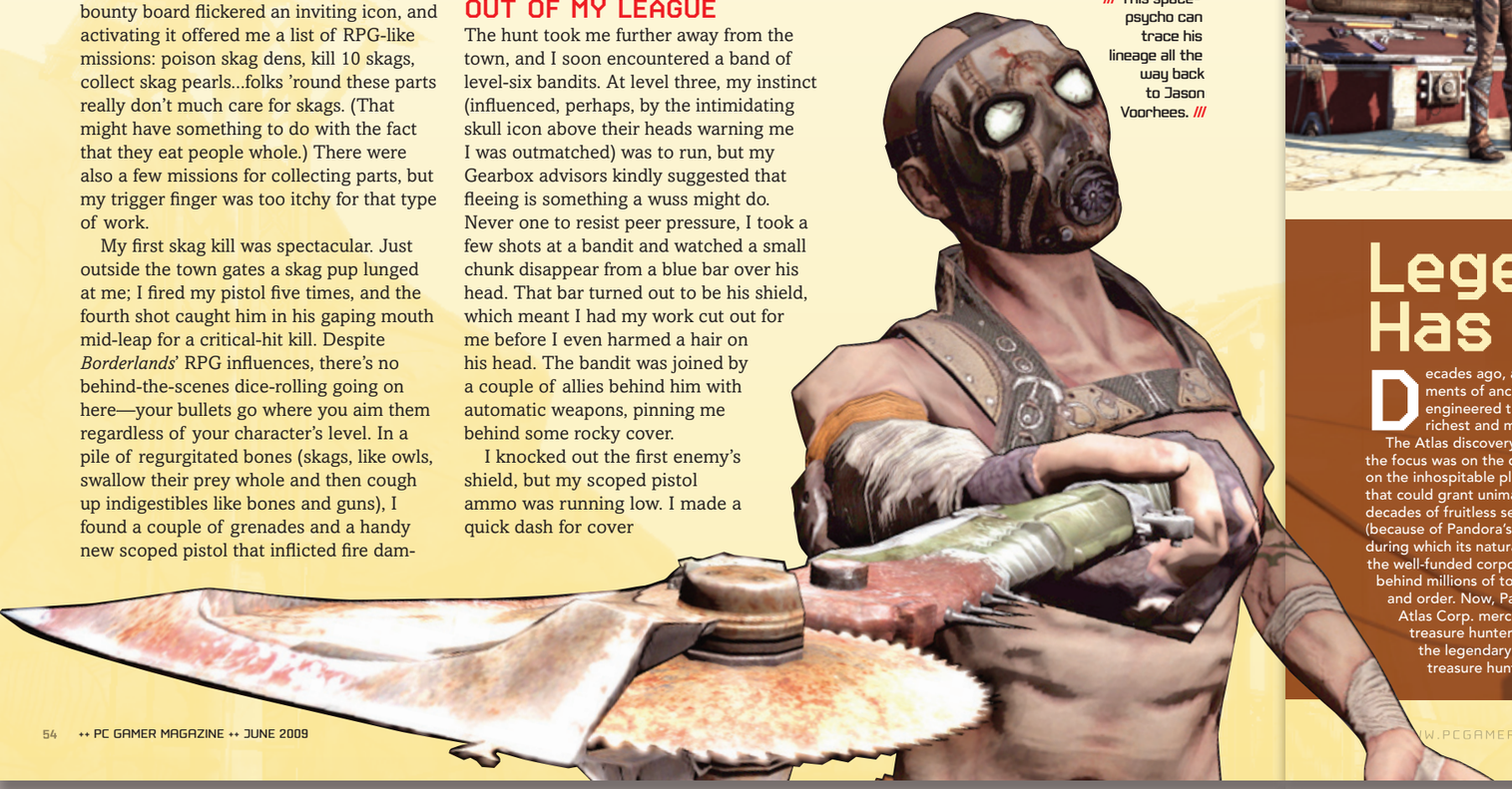
Playing as Rolland, I spawned in a ramshackle settlement that looked like a classic old west town, had it been built out of spaceship debris. A nearby bounty board flickered an inviting icon, and activating it offered me a list of RPG-like missions: poison skag dens, kill 10 skags, collect skag pearls...folks 'round these parts really don't much care for skags. (That might have something to do with the fact that they eat people whole.) There were also a few missions for collecting parts, but my trigger finger was too itchy for that type of work.

My first skag kill was spectacular. Just outside the town gates a skag pup lunged at me; I fired my pistol five times, and the fourth shot caught him in his gaping mouth mid-leap for a critical-hit kill. Despite *Borderlands*' RPG influences, there's no behind-the-scenes dice-rolling going on here—your bullets go where you aim them regardless of your character's level. In a pile of regurgitated bones (skags, like owls, swallow their prey whole and then cough up indigestibles like bones and guns), I found a couple of grenades and a handy new scoped pistol that inflicted fire damage. I almost felt sorry for the skag pups as I leveled up twice from massacring them. In the final game, leveling up would let me improve skills like Rolland's deployable turret, but for now it just made me generally more powerful.

OUT OF MY LEAGUE

The hunt took me further away from the town, and I soon encountered a band of level-six bandits. At level three, my instinct (influenced, perhaps, by the intimidating skull icon above their heads warning me I was outmatched) was to run, but my Gearbox advisors kindly suggested that fleeing is something a wuss might do. Never one to resist peer pressure, I took a few shots at a bandit and watched a small chunk disappear from a blue bar over his head. That bar turned out to be his shield, which meant I had my work cut out for me before I even harmed a hair on his head. The bandit was joined by a couple of allies behind him with automatic weapons, pinning me behind some rocky cover.

I knocked out the first enemy's shield, but my scoped pistol ammo was running low. I made a quick dash for cover closer to the first bandit, switched to a shotgun, and unloaded on him. Down he went! But my maneuver had crossed that fine line between bravery and stupidity, and his friends gunned me down mercilessly before I could turn their fallen



/// This space-psycho can trace his lineage all the way back to Jason Voorhees. ///

/// Pandora is a lot like LA—it's hot, full of crazy people, and you can't get anywhere without a car. Fortunately the Runner buggy is a sweet ride. ///

Fun Fact

Gearbox's internal code name for *Borderlands* is "Willow" (so that they could discuss the game while out to lunch in an area packed with game developers). Before settling on the name *Borderlands*, they considered the names Pandora and Eon. Gamecock's recent shooter *Legendary* was originally going to be called Pandora, but Gearbox had already trademarked the name.

/// It's always wise to carry an enormous box of guns with you wherever you go. You never know when it will come in handy. ///

/// After hibernating for decades, Pandora's wildlife is hungry. ///

Legend Has It

Decades ago, an interstellar corporation called Atlas found fragments of ancient alien technology in a wrecked ship. They reverse-engineered the technology and sold it, quickly making them the richest and most powerful corporation in the galaxy.

The Atlas discovery set off a gold rush on many worlds, but for many, the focus was on the distant planet Pandora. Rumor had it that somewhere on the inhospitable planet lies an alien vault full of pristine technology that could grant unimaginable wealth to whoever finds it first. But after decades of fruitless searching and the sudden emergence of hostile wildlife (because of Pandora's slow orbit, the planet has an extremely long winter during which its natural inhabitants were dormant in hibernation), most of the well-funded corporate excavations have abandoned the planet, leaving behind millions of tons of industrial junk and a complete vacuum of law and order. Now, Pandora is home to handfuls of settlers, roving bandits, Atlas Corp. mercenaries called the Crimson Lance, and persistent treasure hunters recruited by a mysterious agent determined to find the legendary vault. You, and up to three friends in co-op, are those treasure hunters.

/// Geraldo will open the alien vault live on national television. ///

My maneuver had crossed the line between bravery and stupidity, and his friends gunned me down mercilessly.

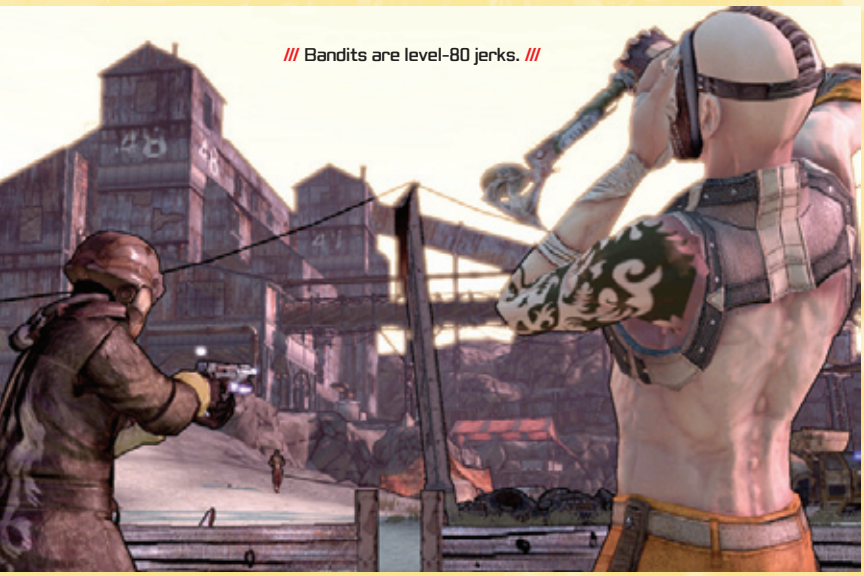
comrade's higher-level weapon against them. I did squeeze off a few parting shots in a *Left 4 Dead*-style incapacitated state from which, if I'd had a co-op buddy, I could have been revived. Also, if I'd somehow managed to drop another of the bandits from the ground, I'd have gotten a second wind. But no, I sucked too much.

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...

I respawned back in town, and reinforcements arrived in the form of a Gearbox employee playing as Mordecai. Or so I thought—but the first thing he did was pick a fight. Meleeing another player does no damage, but it's the *Borderlands* equivalent of slapping someone across the face with a glove. My honor demanded that I accept his challenge, so I smacked him back. A countdown began, and suddenly a force field sparked to life, surrounding us and creating an impromptu dueling arena out of a section of the town from which only one man would emerge. Of course, my character was two levels above his, and a few shots from my shotgun ended the duel quickly.

We decided to settle our differences on neutral ground, so he led me to one of *Borderlands*' arenas—underground facilities stocked with weapons and a computer system that allows you to temporarily equalize combatants' levels (you can set it to a high level if you want access to high-level weapons) and weapon sets for the purpose of settling grudges, *Quake III Arena*-style. On a small circular map with a catwalk spanning the length, I eked out a 3-2 rocket match victory. Arenas are a just-for-fun mini-game within the vast shooter world, perfect for satisfying that PvP itch when you've had enough of your co-op partner's crap.

Afterward we went on a bandit-killing spree, clearing out an old mine where they'd set up camp. Highlights included catching an unfortunate melee bandit in a crossfire and ripping him apart; watching my teammate blast away using an assault rifle with explosive rounds; me trying to throw a grenade but accidentally deploying a turret that ended up being much more effective thanks to the added firepower and the cover provided by its shield generator; killing three bandits with one proximity grenade; and reviving my ally three times when he got himself in over his head.

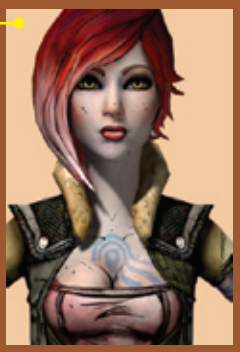


/// Bandits are level-80 jerks. ///

Four Fortune Hunters

LILITH

Lilith is a Siren, a "magicy" type of character who's mysteriously in tune with alien technology. Her tattoos glow as her powers activate—the one that was demonstrated for me was her ethereal phase walk that allows her to become invisible and invulnerable, move around, and then appear anywhere. At higher levels the ability can be upgraded so that she creates a damaging shockwave effect when she vanishes and reappears.



MORDECAI

Mordecai is a Hunter, a lanky ninja-like guy who specializes in hanging back to take shots from a distance. He can also bust out a sword for melee combat, and his special ability is to sic his pet bloodwing bird on an enemy. The internal debate at Gearbox over whether to keep his Monarch-like beard rages on.

BRICK

Gearbox originally designed *Borderlands* with three player character models, but after testing for a while they found that something was missing: the tank. And thus a fourth character, Brick the Berserker, was born—a gigantic hunk of muscle and meat with the mass of all three other characters combined who specializes in beating the ever-living crap out of anything he can get his hands on. He has bolts strapped to his fists and boots for that extra maiming action, and he wears the paw of his late beloved dog around his neck (which, by the way, is three times as wide as his head). His active skill is to inject himself with some kind of super-steroid for a temporary Barry Bonds-like boost in melee power.

ROLLAND

Before Brick came around, Rolland was the beefiest of the three characters. Now, his Solider class is more a Jack-of-all-trades type of guy. As a former Crimson Lance mercenary, Rolland still has bits of their high-tech armor integrated into his outfit. He's also got a handy piece of equipment: a deployable automated turret that doubles as a shield.

As a fast-paced shooter, Borderlands already delivers—weapons, enemies, co-op, and PvP action

WHACKING A BEEHIVE

I also got to play a short four-player co-op mission, although this was on the Xbox version of the game. We drove a pair of Runner buggies out into the desert—I manned the high-powered gun turret on the roof and picked off pursuing bandit patrols as they attacked, demolishing them in satisfying fireballs. Soon, we arrived at a rock formation that was impassible by buggy, so we crossed it on foot. Suddenly the ground shook and a tremendous creature emerged from beneath the soil. This, I was told, was the rak hive—a walking colony of belligerent bat-like animals that were terrorizing the nearby settlement. Fighting the urge to comment on what its mouth looked like, I equipped a shock-enhanced sniper rifle and backed off, targeting the hive's four white eyes and popping them like enormous oozing zits one by one.

That was a lot like whacking a beehive with a stick, and winged creatures poured out of holes on the mammoth's back, swarming us. My allies covered me while avoiding the hive's stomping feet, swatting the fliers out of the air with shotguns, allowing me to focus on bringing the beast down. The raks' agitation intensified at the loss of their home, and they practically blackened the sky with their swarm—a sign of a good time to make a tactical withdrawal if I ever saw one.

As a fast-paced shooter, *Borderlands* already delivers—weapons, enemies, co-op, and PvP action are all there and up to expectations, and looking fantastic thanks to the new art style. The question of whether it will distinguish itself as a memorable game that we'll want to keep playing after the first time through will revolve largely around how well Gearbox integrates the RPG elements, which were mostly only hinted at during my play time. But Randy Pitchford has been wanting to make this game for a long time, and he has no intention of wasting the opportunity. "Mixing the genres like this is like one of those holy grail pitches that you're just like, someday, somebody's going to do it. Well, we're doing it now, man!"

VITALS :: DEVELOPER: GEARBOX **PUBLISHER:** 2K **RELEASE DATE:** FALL 2009 **URL:** WWW.BORDERLANDSTHEGAME.COM

Drawing vs. Render

How close did Gearbox come to realizing the vision of a concept art style? See for yourself. On the left is the concept artist's painting of Brick. On the right is the game version with the concept-style textures. Aside from a little more definition and detail on the right, they're amazingly similar.

/// This amazing image doesn't really do justice to the immense size of the rak hive. An African elephant wouldn't even come up to his knee. ///

"Yesterday I got a pistol that fires shotgun shells that light people on fire."

Arguably the best thing about RPG gameplay is tons and tons of awesome loot, and *Borderlands* ports that concept over to the first-person shooter by giving you enough loot to last a lifetime. Gearbox currently estimates that the game will support between 500,000 and 600,000 unique weapons—pared down from the 17 million that could be created using combinations of the gun components in the database. Each weapon you find or buy in the game is virtually guaranteed to be unique, like a snowflake that can blow your face off.

With so many weapons in play, you need to be able to spot what you're looking for without reading stats all day (though you can do that too, using a handy pop-up interface that compares the gun you're looking at with the one in your hand and lets you easily see if it's an upgrade or a downgrade). If a gun has a longer barrel or a scope attached, you can tell it's going to be accurate at long range; a gun with a bigger stock will have less recoil; a larger magazine that extends below the grip indicates a gun that needs to be reloaded less frequently, and a side-mounted magazine takes a little longer to reload; and a blade fixed to the barrel is a pretty good hint that the gun would make an excellent melee weapon. Finally, the color of any glowing bits on the gun will tell you if it does fire, shock, explosive, or acid damage. And of course, rare weapons will be highlighted in green or purple to make sure you spot them.

Adding to the visual variety and distinctiveness, there are 12 different equipment manufacturers with their own design style and specialties. Jacobs, for example, makes extremely high-quality pistols, sniper rifles, and shotguns, decorating them using a material that's rare on Pandora: wood. Other manufacturers have a more high-tech look and use materials like plastic and composites.

/// One enemy only builds turrets, ever closer to your base. ///

/// Cryo troops: *Red Alert*'s Thaddeus. ///

RED ALERT 3 Uprising

See if you can guess which RTS I'm talking about here: "Your units' pathfinding abilities are somewhat erratic, they'll frequently stand around watching a friendly structure get destroyed, and controlling large numbers of them is awkward." Correct! It was the one you said. And all of them.

So we're used to this stuff. It didn't spoil *Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3* for me—I loved it in spite of its flaws.

It spoils *Uprising*, a $20 standalone episode of new single-player campaigns and game modes. There's a small speck of spittle on my screen as I write this, and the number of heated, profane rows I've had with 50-pixel computer game characters in the last few hours is enough that I don't even recall which was so exasperating as to trigger an actual ejection of saliva mid-vituperation. It's not something I'm proud of.

There are two reasons *Uprising* causes particularly acute levels of impotent nerd rage. The first is the missions: They suck conspicuously. *Red Alert 3*'s campaign had a few duds too, but its prevailing philosophy was that when it took away your tools (like the ability to build a base) it would give you something cool to play with instead (like the KING OF ALL ROBOTS).

Uprising's philosophy is that when it takes away your tools (which almost every mission does), it gives the enemy something cool to violate you with (which they do vigorously). When the few units it does let you use start to behave unexpectedly, it's pretty much Game Over.

The first Soviet mission, which for some reason must be completed to unlock any of the other faction campaigns, is a perfect example. It starts you with a limited number of the most boring unit in the game, and ends with you facing new Allied artillery pieces that can wipe out your entire force before you ever even see them.

When your objective instructions are clear, it's Simon Says—you just have to do what you're told when you're told to do it. When they're not, it's Simon Wordlessly Incinerates Everyone You've Ever Known.

IN ADDITION TO A mini-campaign for each faction, *Uprising* also adds the Commander's Challenge mode: a global campaign in which you choose which mission and which faction to play. The idea is to unlock new units by defeating a commander who uses them, which sounds nice until you consider the obvious implications. As well as giving each of your opponents a cool toy you can't use, it means you start with no interesting units whatsoever. For mission after mission after mission, it's tank rush, tank rush, tank rush.

The second reason that *Uprising* makes me thrash like a petulant schoolboy is that I still love *Red Alert*. You don't curse if you don't care, and I cursed prolifically. I want my Mecha Tengus to follow my VX Choppers properly when I set them all a target because, and I don't say this often enough, I freaking love Mecha Tengus. I love the new units too: The Soviet Mortar Bikes are swift, flexible, and fun; the Empire's Giga Fortress is a floating head of hilariously fatal deathbeams; and the jetpacking Allied Cryo-Legionnaires talk like a Schwarzeneggian Mr. Freeze.

Interestingly, an old unit is the star of *Uprising*: psychic Japanese schoolgirl maniac Yuriko Omega. There's a special prequel campaign in which you play as her alone, with four hotkeys to her special abilities in place of the usual interface. It works at first: This is a genuinely new way to play, and her Telekinesis ability is wonderful to hurl enemies around with. But by the campaign's conclusion, trying to avoid every unnecessary hitpoint of damage to survive becomes a tiresomely fussy task.

Like the rest of *Uprising*, the Yuriko campaign is single-player only. And bizarrely, that extends even to the skirmish mode: You can play against the AI, but there's no Versus mode or multiplayer of any kind. It's a particular shame because Skirmish is the best way to play: The new units up the kerplosion ante significantly. It proves what should have been obvious: A good game is best when you don't script it, gimp it, or over-restrict it.

The file that runs when you start *Uprising* is "ra3ep1.exe," which suggests EA LA are planning more. If so, I hope they accept that their interface and AI simply aren't good enough to let the player's success hinge on a handful of units. And I hope they create something that lets us flex our tactical creativity a little more than this. TOM FRANCIS

FLAVORS OF SPAM

HOW DO THE NEW UNITS WORK WHEN APPLIED LIBERALLY AND WITHOUT FORETHOUGHT?

1

/// The Empire's Archer Maidens can let off a huge salvo right away, but they take time to fire a new laser death arrow. ///

2

/// With floating Giga Fortress samurai heads of death, three's a spam. Tough on tanks, tough on the causes of tanks. ///

3

/// The Soviet Crushers win: no guns, but they're amphibious, run over man and vehicle alike, and chew through buildings. ///

CAN I GET THREE NEW UNITS IN ONE PIC?

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** EA LA **PUBLISHER:** EA **REQUIREMENTS:** 2.6GHZ CPU, 1GB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 6800/RADEON X800 VIDEOCARD, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 1 **ESRB:** T **PRICE:** $20, EA DOWNLOAD STORE ONLY **DRM:** ONLINE ACTIVATION; 5 REVOCABLE INSTALLS

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Awesome new units; first half of the Yuriko Omega campaign works well; only $20.

LOWS// Poor AI; frustrating mission design; too many tank-rushes; no multiplayer or co-op.

BOTTOM LINE// Destroying dumb AI players with crazy destructive units is entertaining, but it doesn't have the same longevity that the full game did. *RA3*'s AI simply cannot prop up a single-player-only game.

0% BETTER >> 100% **63%**

++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

WALLACE & GROMIT'S Grand Adventures Ep 1

NO MORE CHEESY PUNS! I CAMEMBERT IT!

The most surprising thing about Telltale Games' latest episodic adventure is that you quickly forget it's from an American developer.

That's no small feat when dealing with something as quintessentially British as *Wallace & Gromit*, and nor is the fact that—for the most part—it feels right. It doesn't simply resemble the original stop-motion cartoons. It absolutely nails the look and feel, right down to the fake fingerprints embedded in the characters' 3D modelled plasticine. There's no Peter Sallis (the voice of Wallace in the animations), but everything else is exactly what you'd hope for in a *W&G* conversion.

This series is four episodes long—Telltale's shortest yet—with installments due on a monthly basis. This first one, *Fright of the Bumblebees*, is relatively simple. Wallace and his long-suffering dog Gromit have just set up their latest home business, making honey for their sleepy northern town. They need 50 gallons of the stuff by nightfall to pay off a debt from their last wacky business, only Wallace has forgotten to plant any flowers for his bees. The solution is obvious: Whip up some quick-grow formula for the daisies, and if you can't guess what happens next, you may in fact be legally dead. Sorry to break it to you. Can I have your stuff?

> You may be legally dead. Can I have your stuff?

That's the only real problem with this episode's story. It's a fine premise, but not one that lends itself to many twists and turns. Much of the fun in the original shorts comes from the tight mix of down-to-earth northern English style and outlandish escapades, but while you may not know exactly what's coming up in *Fright*'s next puzzle or scene, you can have a pretty good stab at predicting the general sweep of this story before the introduction is over. In a similar vein, if you've played any of Telltale's previous games, you know how the adventure part works already. Lots of Three Trials-style puzzles so that you always have multiple objectives on the go, relatively simple one-step solutions, and a couple of more dynamic set-pieces thrown in for good measure.

This familiarity is somewhat disappointing, if not a killer. Like *Sam & Max* and *Strong Bad*, *W&G* is a fun, casual adventure. It's simply that the focus is clearly on getting several episodes out, relying on a handful of inoffensive techniques to build puzzles and structure the adventure, rather than necessarily looking for innovative ways to handle each new license.

THERE'S A GREAT EXAMPLE of this right at the start, where you have to repair a Rube Goldberg machine by finding the missing parts. It sounds like a perfect puzzle, and the idea is solid. It's just that it begs to be replaced with some kind of basic *Incredible Machine*-type sequence where you actually get to make your own crazy contraption out of household parts. Likewise, the sequences where you play as Gromit quickly fall prey to one obvious problem—he's mute, and only gets specific animations for the cutscenes and success animations, leaving him with just head-shaking where quips normally go.

Most of the puzzles are decent enough though, with some great individual sequences. A shooting bit is particularly fun, as you defend Wallace's house using the porridge gun and a number of impromptu garden traps, and there's plenty of using and abusing of other inventions scattered around too. The writing keeps it all very amiable and playful, especially the stereotypical bickering couple, and one puzzle that could be solved in five seconds if Wallace wasn't too embarrassed to draw his female neighbor's attention to an important inventory object nestled out of sight in her prim cardigan. That said, none of the sequences have much in the way of drama, with Telltale still seemingly terrified of giving their villains any clout. Compared to the likes of Feathers McGraw, Preston, or even Piella, a handful of apathetic, if admittedly giant bees really doesn't cut it as a threat. It's just a little too laid-back for its own good, even when everything kicks off.

This is easily fixable though, and the signs are good. *Fright* may not be the most exciting adventure ever made, but it's a more than solid starting point. Telltale handles the aesthetics with aplomb, and three episodes remain in which to polish off the rough edges and hopefully squeeze a few more dynamic stories and characters out of its virtual plasticine factories.

RICHARD COBBETT

DEVELOPING HIVES

IN THE WORDS OF THE NAKED APIARIST: "OW! ME BUM!"

/// Want to be a great beekeeper? That's not very ambitious. All you need is a garden and some flowers. And some bees. ///

/// Bees can be dangerous. That's why I recommend getting a dog to do your dirty work for you. ///

/// Bees die if they sting, so you might need several dogs. Blind ones, who can't see the pile of canine corpses. ///

/// Thanks to your faithful friend, your business is booming. Just remember: you've got to sleep sometime. ///

IT'S NOT SO GRIM OOP NORTH

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** TELLTALE **PUBLISHER:** TELLTALE **REQUIREMENTS:** P4 2GHZ, 512MB RAM, 64MB VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** P4 3GHZ, 1GB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 6600GT/RADEON 3450 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 1 **ESRB:** E **PRICE:** $35 (WHOLE 4-EPISODE SEASON)

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Strong dialogue writing; impressive graphics nail *W&G*'s look and feel.

LOWS// Predictable story; unambitious adventure design; high levels of cheese.

BOTTOM LINE// *Fright of the Bumblebees* meticulously recreates *Wallace & Gromit*'s style and is a great starting point for this adventure miniseries, but takes too few chances to achieve anything brilliant.

0% BETTER >> 100% **74%**

++ GOOD ++

Sins of a Solar Empire ENTRENCHMENT

COME AND GET ME

Taking over the galaxy just got a lot more complex. It may be a "mini-expansion," but *Entrenchment* makes big changes to the pace and routine of *Sins of a Solar Empire*'s mid-to-late game strategy.

New possibilities arise everywhere you look. Attacking deep into enemy territory with your main fleet used to mean leaving your entire empire undefended; now huge, upgradable starbases, minefields, and enhanced defense structures can hold the line against a moderate fleet until help arrives. Worthless obstacles like a nebula or space junk are now valuable real estate upon which a starbase can be deployed and upgraded into a thriving trade hub. The hazards have also multiplied: Sending fleets into enemy space without scouting ahead used to be standard operating procedure—now that lack of caution will burn you in the form of minefields and a retreat penalty while a starbase is operational in the well. Provoking an enemy into making that mistake is a great way to turn the tide to your advantage.

Suddenly conquering enemy planets takes more than just having a bigger, more teched-up fleet than your defensive-minded opponent. More than ever, you have to be smart about what planet to attack, when to strike, and what ships you send to do the job.

> It's a modest but smart expansion

Each of the three factions has roughly the same set of new units and abilities, but the way those abilities are used is different from faction to faction, like in the way mines are deployed. The notable exception: Unlike their TEC and Advent counterparts, Vasari starbases are mobile within gravity wells, making them a viable and devastating offensive weapon—if you can defend them while they build near an enemy planet. Meanwhile, the TEC and Advent get a new cruiser with heavy anti-structure torpedoes that can devastate starbases from afar. The increased variety adds more depth when playing as or against all three sides.

Conquering a well-defended enemy will take you significantly longer in *Entrenchment* (adding to *Sins*' already epic-length games) at least the first few times through as you master new offensive tactics, but even the enhanced defense won't slow experienced players down for long. Before going online, you can sharpen your skills against the AI, which has gotten a lot smarter and knows how to use the new defensive options.

Entrenchment is a modest but smart expansion that makes the most of a few interesting additions. It will be appreciated most by players who want more options, more depth, and more epic space battles, but less so for players who want a faster-paced game they can play during lunch breaks. Then again, *Sins* never was that game to begin with. DAN STAPLETON

/// Straying into an enemy minefield can wipe out your fleet before their starbase even has a chance to destroy it. ///

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** IRONCLAD **PUBLISHER:** STARDOCK **REQUIREMENTS:** SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE, INTERNET CONNECTION, IMPULSE CLIENT **MAX PLAYERS:** 10 **ESRB:** T **PRICE:** $9.95

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// New defenses force different strategic approaches; starbases have multiple upgrade paths; improved AI.

LOWS// Few new units; games can last even longer than in vanilla *Sins*.

BOTTOM LINE// *Entrenchment* is an excellent micro-add-on that will suck you back into multi-hour games of *Sins of a Solar Empire* and introduce tons of new strategic options.

0% BETTER >> 100% **87%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

/// Six rebel bases down, only 11 to go. ///

Tom Clancy's HAWX

AN AIRBORNE SCRATCHING POST FOR YOUR ITCHY TRIGGER FINGER

Air warfare has come a long way since the day in 1815 when British military balloonist Henry Hunt bombed Napoleon's tent with a stale pork pie and a ginger-beer bottle full of warm urine. The military is currently testing a radar-guided anti-tank missile that flies down the gun barrel of its target, blows the breechblock off, then releases a swarm of really annoyed wasps.

Amazing. Unlike *HAWX*. This frothy don't-call-me-a-flight-sim flight-sim is doggedly entertaining, but has far too little personality and variety to be great. Ubisoft, realizing that most of us can't be bothered to plough through manuals the size of Braille telephone directories, or deal with challenges like landings and spin recovery, have fashioned their own friendly, frenetic *Ace Combat*-like sky shooter.

FANS OF THAT PC-SHY series will know exactly what to expect from this inferior imitation. Skies, seas, and land surfaces teeming with targets? Check. Dozens of different delta-winged warbirds to choose from? Check. Jets darting around the firmament laden with enough missilery to rubble medium-sized Himalayan mountains? Check.

If you go a minute without killing something in a *HAWX* sortie, it's probably worth checking you haven't pressed pause by mistake. Most of the mayhem is wrought with fire-and-forget missiles, good for ground or air targets. This is a shame, because the few occasions you're forced to use bombs, rockets, or cannon are some of the most engaging.

All kills are confirmed with a prominent HUD message that tells you how many XP you've just earned. Illusion-dissipating pop-ups also appear when you win achievements. Killed 1,000 ground targets? Dodged 100 missiles? Not yawned for half-an-hour? Have a pointless certificate.

The dull Clancy-couched near-future setting has allowed the devs to fill hangars with familiar fuselages. It's also enabled them to pep up the turn-and-burn with pleasing sky-fi such as multi-missiles (down four bandits with a single key press!), ERS (HUD hoops that help you target and evade) and, potentially best of all, computerized handling assistance. When you need a little extra agility you can switch off the stall-prevention system and cloud dance as nature intended. It's a fine idea. The trouble is, deactivating assist also triggers an awkward third-person camera. Spoofing an incoming SAM is hard enough without the added confusion of not knowing which way your plane is pointing.

That 66 percent score down there is starting to look generous, so I'd better mention the surprisingly excellent scenery and inviting multiplayer. The 14-scenario campaign takes you all over the world, and wherever you go the landscapes (especially the lumpy bits) are lovely. Every episode can be flown cooperatively. Tire of teamwork and you've got a rocking deathmatch game to fall back on.

What you don't have, however, is a game with any sort of charm or character. You "fly" (the flight model is as basic as they come), you fight, you pump out missiles like a broken sidewinder vending machine—but at no point do you really care. *Ace Combat* never felt this empty. TIM STONE

/// Cockpit view is crude, but at least it's there ///

/// *HAWX* is a war fought over oil—literally. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Non-stop action; beautiful scenery; co-op-compatible missions.

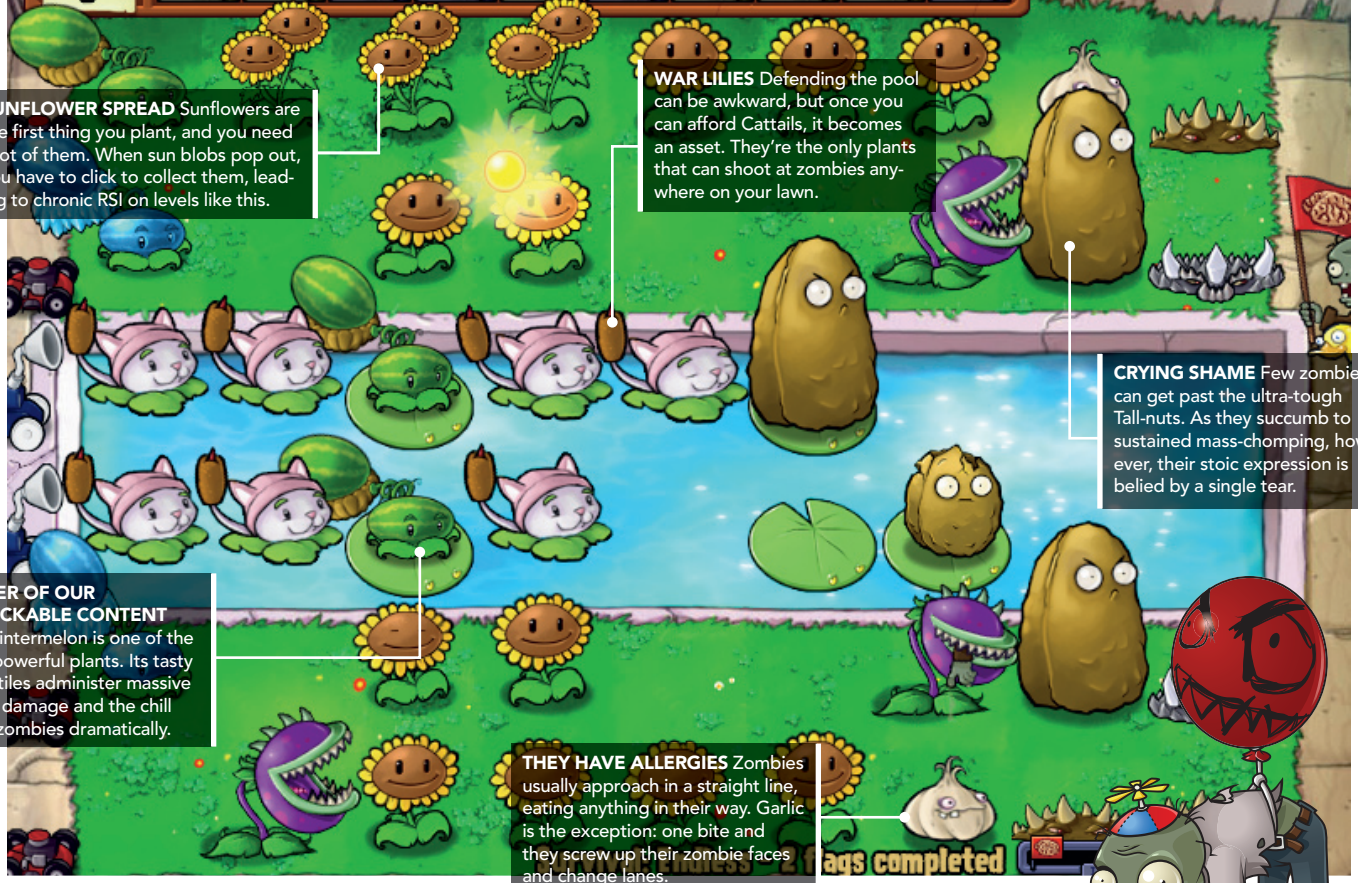
LOWS// Lack of personality; few engaging moments; a sometimes-confusing camera

BOTTOM LINE// *HAWX* is a bimbo of a flight combat game: air-headed and shallow, but gorgeous to look at. Unfortunately, in games, this doesn't mean it's more fun.

0% BETTER >> 100% **66%**

++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

VITALS // DEVELOPER: UBISOFT ROMANIA **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT **REQUIREMENTS:** P4 2GHZ, 1GB RAM (2GB VISTA), 128MB GEFORCE 5900/RADEON X800 VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 8 **ESRB:** T **PRICE:** $49.99



PLANTS vs. ZOMBIES

WHEN THERE'S NO MORE ROOM IN HELL, THE DEAD WILL STROLL THE LAWN

This was on the tip of everyone's tongues, PopCap just gave it a name. The name they wanted to give it was *Lawn of the Dead*, but apparently there were issues with that.

PC GAMER EDITORS' CHOICE

You have a lawn. Soon, the dead will attempt to cross it and eat "YOUR BRAINS!" To stop them, you place plants that shoot, block, trap, freeze, eat, or explode in their path.

It's genuinely one of the most exciting games I've played this year. *Plants vs. Zombies* belongs to no genre I know, and it's casual only in the sense that it's easy to understand. There's nothing casual about the 30 goddamn hours I've spent, effectively, gardening.

You get a new plant type to play with at the end of every level for about seven hours (the total running time of the Adventure mode). Soon the seeds outnumber the maximum you can take on a level, so long before you've unlocked all 48, the decision of which ones to take with you becomes agonizing. If you take both the Wall-Nut and the Tall-Nut for defense, you won't have space to take the Split Pea to shoot backward at any burrowing zombies that get past your Magnet Shrooms.

It helps that you get to peer over your garden fence before a level starts, to see which zombie types are incoming. For a while, the most advanced is a zombie who has had the debatable wit to place a bucket on his head for protection. But soon you're flooded with more formidable configurations of ambulatory stiff.

There are counter-plants for each, but *PvZ* never lets you settle into a comfortable build order. You tend to learn the hard way which zombies absolutely have to be crushed the second they show up, and which will generally succumb to raw firepower despite their special abilities.

The drip-feed of new toys is what keeps the Adventure exciting, but very quietly, another side to *PvZ* is building in the background. Sets of levels are punctuated with silly little minigames, and mysterious options appear on the main menu. By the time you finish the Adventure, the obscene wealth of other things to do already outweighs it for entertainment value.

One of the extra ways to play deserves special mention: I, Zombie is a delicious reversal in which you have to choose which zombie types to purchase to strategically decimate a preset garden.

I love *Bejeweled* and *Peggle*, but I stop playing those games when I tire momentarily of their singular mechanic, or get irritated by their random elements. I stop playing *Plants vs. Zombies* when someone makes me. This has none of the limitations and more substance than either game. TOM FRANCIS

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Excellent and varied game modes; simple but addictive gameplay; great humor.

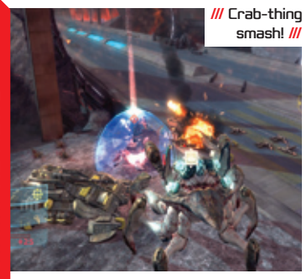
LOWS// Will eat your time and/or brains.

BOTTOM LINE// *PvZ* is not a hardcore strategy game, nor is it a hard strategy game, but it is a strategy game. And a strategy game by PopCap turns out to be a frighteningly compelling thing.

0% BETTER >> 100% **90%**

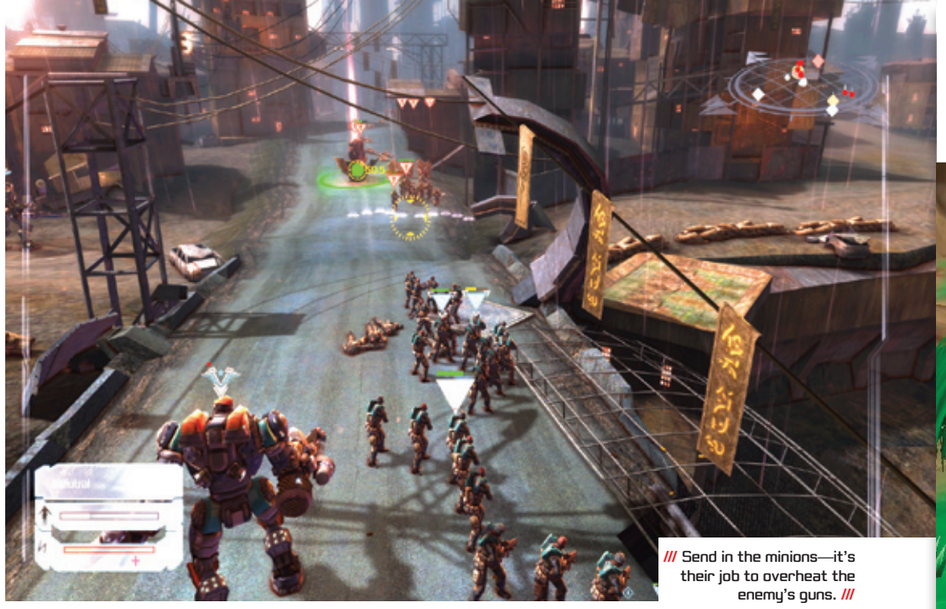
++ EDITORS' CHOICE ++

VITALS // DEVELOPER: POPCAP **PUBLISHER:** POPCAP **REQUIREMENTS:** PIII 1.2GHZ, 256MB RAM, DIRECTX 8 GPU, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** SLIGHTLY MORE THAN THAT **MAX PLAYERS:** 1 **ESRB:** E **PRICE:** $20



/// Crab-thing smash! ///

/// The "whip" unit selection = fail. ///



/// Send in the minions—it's their job to overheat the enemy's guns. ///

STORMRISE

AN ECOLOGICAL WARNING FOR US ALL

You're a highly successful dev team. You've released a slew of genre-defining RTS titles for years on the PC, and now you want a slice of the console pie. You are Creative Assembly. You've just released *Stormrise*, and you've just screwed the pooch.

At its heart, this is a fairly traditional, futuristic RTS: unit building, resource management, robots and dudes with guns and/or tentacles rushing each other.

The twist (and there's got to be a twist these days) is that it's a ground-level RTS. None of that omnipresence here, it's all low-down and dirty in a fight to the death over who gets the wreckage of a ruined and broken Earth.

Despite humanity having solved all the ecological problems of the world, "The Event" happened, a conveniently unexplained phenomenon that caused everyone to split into two categories: well-prepared vault-dwellers, and the ooh-it's-a-bit-unpleasant-out-here muties who had to stay topside.

In the campaign you play as Geary, the classic amnesiac hero now strapped into a hulking mech. From here you control the battlefield right at the frontline. And by control, what I really mean is flail wildly.

Stormrise introduces the "Whip" unit selection system. It's meant to enable intuitive, next-gen controls, which translates to a completely counter-intuitive concession to the fact that it's being released on consoles and has to work with the limitations of the gamepad.

TRYING TO SELECT a specific unit is a nightmare as soon as there are more than three squads under your control. Hold the right mouse button down and whip the cursor in the direction of your preferred unit and hey presto you've selected someone miles away from the fighting while your frontline troops get a mutated tentacle enema. It's a colossal pain in the reproductive area.

The control system is the biggest problem of this game, but by no means the only one. It's understandable that the world is not going to be in a pretty state centuries after some kind of ecological meltdown, but why does it have to be so dark?

The strangely soulless nature of this beast is more worrying. None of your units have any personality. Things are more interesting when you take control of the mutant Sai race in the multiplayer or skirmish modes, but in the campaign the paint-by-numbers good guys are beyond superficial. No matter how many heavy rock power-chords happen to be thrashing in the background.

As a company that has produced some of the most intelligent RTS games out there, it's a shock to find The Creative Assembly behind such wanton hokum as *Stormrise*. When you have an entire genre that was designed and perfected on the PC mechanically reclaimed and rehashed for the consoles, then spat back at us, it's tough to swallow. More so when the people serving it up are responsible for so much that is right with the strategy genre.

Stormrise should never have received a PC release. That way I wouldn't feel that foul taste I get at the back of my throat every time I boot up *Empire: Total War* and see the Creative Assembly logo appear.

DAVE JAMES

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Interesting Sai faction; decent graphics.

LOWS// Requires DX10 and Vista; terrible controls; boring good guys; uninteresting units.

BOTTOM LINE// You have to wonder—after discarding proven mouse and keyboard controls and creating broken ones made for gamepads, why did Sega even bother releasing this on PC?

0% BETTER >> 100% **35%**

++ DON'T BOTHER ++

VITALS // DEVELOPER: THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY **PUBLISHER:** SEGA **REQUIREMENTS:** VISTA SP1, 2.6GHZ DUAL-CORE CPU, 2GB RAM, DIRECT X10 GPU **RECOMMENDED:** 2.4GHZ QUAD-CORE CPU, 4GB RAM, GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 GPU **MAX PLAYERS:** 8 **ESRB:** M **PRICE:** $49.99

THE MAW ...THE MERRIER

/// Firing lasers out of eyes should be in all games. ///

/// Maw gets bigger. And sometimes bluer. ///

Part *Katamari*, part 3D platformer, *The Maw* is a game about eating stuff. This is to be wholeheartedly approved of. Frank, a small blue alien creature, wanders the land with a pink blob, Maw, composed of one eyeball, a mouth, and a healthy appetite.

The aim in each of the eight levels is to consume enough of the creatures scattered around for Maw to grow big enough to move on. The trick is finding the food. There are a few beasts that, when eaten, will change Maw's appearance and abilities. Eating a Gastro, a scorpion-like creature with its tail on fire, will change Maw into a fire-breathing blob of destruction. Munching down a bloated, flying Puff-Tor will give Maw the ability to float, then smash down on objects to destroy them. Gobble the right meal, and puzzles will be solvable.

With this concept and the gorgeous character designs, *The Maw* could have been a thrilling time. What Twisted Pixel has made instead is a properly fun platformer that plays in slow-motion.

Everything is sooooo slooooow. As Frank guides the eating machine around on an electric leash, full sprint on his little legs just matches Maw's slothly shuffle, making for wearying movement. Eat enough that Maw is big enough to complete a level and there's a numbing, glacial cutscene, the same each time. It's not the end of the world, but it makes backtracking to achieve 100 percent completion a slog.

Lasting about three hours (if you're collecting everything), *The Maw* is packed with fantastic ideas. The characterization is lovely: Frank's cries for "Maaaw!" when he's off his leash, and Maw's excitable dancing and panting in response, are adorable. All the creatures are detailed with superb mannerisms, which link logically to their related puzzles. It's smart, it's sweet, but it's so sleepy.

The Maw has a few level packs available as DLC on Steam, available for an extra $1.25, but don't shell out. As it is, it's a simple, solidly built puzzle platformer that runs a little short, and really needs some caffeine. JOHN WALKER

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

0% BETTER >> 100% **71%**

++ GOOD ++

VITALS // DEVELOPER: TWISTED PIXEL **PUBLISHER:** TWISTED PIXEL **REQUIREMENTS:** P4 2.2GHZ, 1GB RAM, 256MB GEFORCE 7600/RADEON 2400 VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** CORE 2 DUO 2.2GHZ, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 1 **ESRB:** E **PRICE:** $9.99

/// Here's why Vin Diesel is still single: every date ends with an exploding car. ///

WHEELMAN

8 FAST 8 FURIOUS: BARCELONAN DRIFT

It's *Burnout* as a B-movie; it's *Grand Theft Auto* without any charming steroid users or urban ambiance. *Wheelman* doesn't have the breadth of content or innovation put forth by recent open-world racing games, but its driving mechanics admirably keep pace with modern pedal-pushers.

You're agent Milo Burik (voiced by and modeled after Vin Diesel's bald head), deep undercover in Spanish street gangs as a talented criminal chauffeur. Minutes in, *Wheelman* muddles itself with action movie tropes—a cast of a dozen interchangeable foreign gangsters are introduced so quickly you'll think you're in a revolving door that plays poorly written cutscenes.

Luckily, this is a game where you can *punch things with your car*—using *Wheelman*'s main mechanic, a quick flick of the mouse (or gamepad thumbstick) makes your sedan sidestep like a juking runningback and ram other vehicles. It's also useful for making impossible dodges out of the path of oncoming traffic. Because driving is easily 80 percent of what you do, you'll appreciate that Milo's abilities feel fluid to use—he can also activate slow-mo to snipe the passengers or tires of an enemy car, turbo boost, and execute an "airjack," a superhuman leap out of your driver's seat and into the car in front of you to acquire a new ride.

SOME MISSIONS DO ENTERTAIN, like using a freight truck to bully angry vans as you escape a factory, or scaring a thug that's clinging to your roof into giving you information with reckless driving, but most equate to A-to-B taxi trips, and on-foot sections are about as cookie-cutter as they come (warehouses, exploding barrels, and an SMG!). Barcelona itself is less a living landscape than a sunny Spanish backdrop—pretty, but with only the most basic kind of exploration (breaking statues scattered across the city).

/// Most agents would have a problem with killing cops. Not Milo! ///

Time between missions is filled with 105 side races, taxi missions, car chase quests, and destroy-stuff-for-points events, but not very well. For better or worse, *Wheelman* feels very much like a Vin Diesel movie—how much of a concern that is to you depends on your tolerance for tanktops, chrome rims, and gangster pastiche. EVAN LAHTI

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** TIGON **PUBLISHER:** MIDWAY/UBISOFT **REQUIREMENTS:** 2GHZ DUAL-CORE CPU (2.4GHZ VISTA), 2GB RAM, GEFORCE 7800GT/RADEON X1800XT VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** 2.4GHZ DUAL CORE, 2GB RAM, 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD, TOLERANCE FOR BAD SPANISH VOICE ACTING **MAX PLAYERS:** 1 **ESRB:** M **PRICE:** $49.99

EXTREME CARJACKING!

Hotwiring is for hobos—real, American badasses steal cars without touching the ground. Here's how:

1

/// Tail your car (or bike, in this case) within Vin's jumping range (about 45 feet) of another vehicle, and hit the right mouse button. ///

2

/// Let go of the right mouse button to leap through the air at 90+ mph... ///

3

/// ...and watch Vin kick an innocent Barcelonan citizen teeth-first into the street. Then you speed away to assault more motorists. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Car-on-car melee combat; Unreal 3 and Havok physics produce some pretty action sequences; plenty of breakables to plow through.

LOWS// Deeply derivative; barebones shooting mechanics; confusing gangster-laden plot; very standard side missions.

BOTTOM LINE// An open-world racer that will out-perform low expectations, *Wheelman* executes its core mechanics well, but not much else.

0% BETTER >> 100% **67%**

++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

/// On the plus side, he'll save a fortune on gloves and socks. ///

/// So *that's* what ideas look like. ///

Shellshock 2 BLOOD TRAILS

I'M ALREADY HAVING FLASHBACKS

Were you to attempt to make an FPS with no prior knowledge of the genre, and given only some screenshots of, say, *Battlefield Vietnam* and *Zombie Panic*, this 'Nam-based zombie shooter might be the result.

After all, you wouldn't know that there have already been too many terrible 'Nam games. Or that trying to tell a story about U.S. soldiers who face not only the locals, but the undead, would be both tasteless and idiotic.

HAVING ONLY SEEN screenshots, you might also not have realized that you can usually jump in FPS games. It's useful for crossing horribly designed locations covered in rocks, branches, and crumbled buildings. Nor would you know that weapons and ammo are normally picked up by running over them, rather than trying to find the angle on the pixel that lets you manually select them. You might not even realize that enemies aren't supposed to stand around, staring at you, occasionally flailing, or suddenly start spawning in infinite numbers—something only fixed by dying.

> Enemies shouldn't stand around staring at you

A screenshot showing quick-time events could even confuse you into adding an abortive version of *Typing of the Dead*, where you're forced to hit letter keys in the right order at random moments. And of course you'd have no idea that movement isn't supposed to be so sluggish as to be occasional.

The developers' instincts for creating a series of one-way, monotonous corridors were certainly impressive. But unfortunately no one realized that crouching was supposed to let the player use cover, rather than poke out two feet above it, his head thus turned into soup by 700 near-invisible attackers.

This is a laughably awful shooter that, at its very best, settles into forgettable banality. At its worst, *Shellshock 2* is screamingly irritating. An absolutely horrendous game. JOHN WALKER

/// I call them 'Nambies. Get it? ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Man, this box is hard to fill out sometimes. Let's not and say we did, shall we?

LOWS// Bad controls; bad enemies; bad level design; bad story; bad bad bad.

BOTTOM LINE// If you only avoid one terrible zombie/Vietnam war game like the plague this year, make it *Shellshock 2: Blood Trails*.

0% BETTER >> 100% **23%**

++ DON'T BOTHER ++

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** REBELLION DEVELOPMENTS **PUBLISHER:** EIDOS **REQUIREMENTS:** 3GHZ DUAL-CORE CPU, 1GB RAM (2GB VISTA), 256MB GEFORCE 7600/RADEON 1800 VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** 512MB GEFORCE 8800GT/RADEON 4850 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 1 **ESRB:** M **PRICE:** $29.99

Trogs are a new flavor of freak to kill in slow-mo

FALLOUT 3: The Pitt

BETHESDA INJECTS *FALLOUT* WITH AN RPG STIM-PACK

Interesting moral choices and great loot: two of the components required for outstanding role-playing moments. Unlike *Operation Anchorage*—the first downloadable mini-expansion for *Fallout 3* that delivered the loot but fell short on the choices—*The Pitt* adds a helping of both to the game.

It begins with a radio distress signal that leads you to The Pitt, a town built around a steel foundry run by slave-driving raiders. Both the slaves and the raiders are stricken by a strange form of mutation disease that prevents procreation, disfigures nearly everyone, and turns some into trogs (basically feral ghouls that crawl on all fours). The leader of the raiders claims he has a cure for the mutations—your quest is to infiltrate the town and steal the cure for the slaves.

/// It's not easy bein' green, but you don't have to be a jerk about it. ///

It sounds like a "duh" moral dilemma at first, but things get a little stickier when you uncover the nature of the cure and the price you'll have to pay to get it.

THE MAIN QUEST WILL strip you of your equipment, then put you through a series of disappointingly simple arena battles (my level-15 character dropped all four opponents in seconds without breaking a sweat), hunting for steel ingots in trog-infested territory, looking for a lost slave, and either siding with the slaves or the slavers in a revolt. You can barrel through the DLC in four hours, but if you want to earn all the unique gear (like the laser rifle modified to fire like a shotgun) you'll spend another hour or two searching for ingots. Navigating the maze-like steel plant is a little frustrating (the Pipboy local-area map doesn't deal well with multi-story buildings and catwalks), but the rewards are worth the effort.

The Pitt's industrial look is suitably oppressive and depressing, though it lacks some of the more intricate details in the main game. Main character dialogue is well written and voiced—the raider leader in particular ties *The Pitt* into a few bits of main game lore.

The Pitt shares one regrettable trait with *Anchorage*: neither is perfectly polished. Specifically, some areas in *The Pitt* are prone to crashing (the F5 key is your friend!), and the vicious new chainsaw-like melee weapon, the auto-axe, has a bad habit of turning invisible until you un-equip and re-equip it. Aside from one crash that made me lose a bunch of ingots, it wasn't too bad.

Unlike *Anchorage*, *The Pitt* has exactly what we want more of from Bethesda: the quests, characters, and loot that make the *Fallout* universe so immersive. *The Pitt* is worthy of *Fallout 3*—and good enough to suffer through Microsoft's Games for Windows Live Marketplace to get hold of.

DAN STAPLETON

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Difficult moral decision; great new loot; interesting quests.

LOWS// Noticeable bugs; new enemies only *look* new.

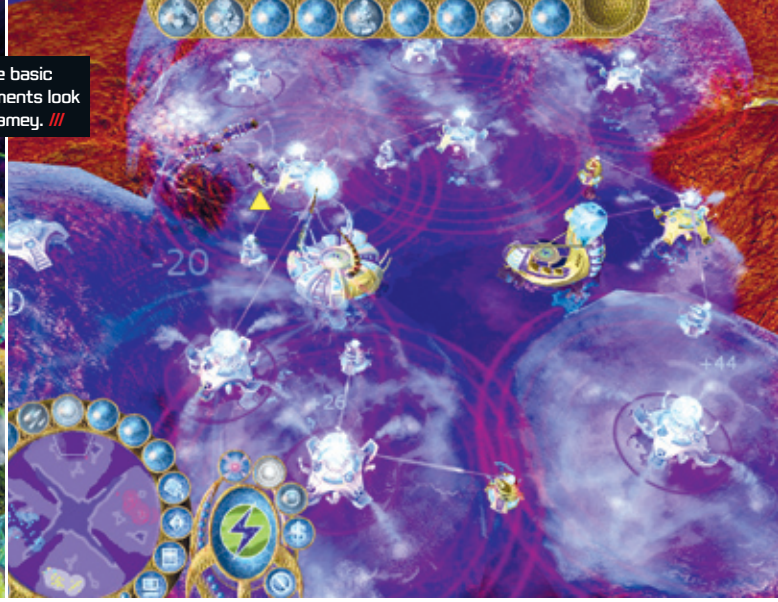
BOTTOM LINE// A fresh infusion of high-quality role-playing quests and new gear to *Fallout 3*, but *The Pitt* isn't an entirely glitch-free experience.

0% BETTER >> 100% **82%**

++ EXCELLENT ++

VITALS :: DEVELOPER: BETHESDA **PUBLISHER:** BETHESDA **REQUIREMENTS:** FALLOUT 3 **ESRB:** M **PRICE:** $10 (800 MICROSOFT POINTS)

/// All the basic environments look a little samey. ///



Perimeter 2 NEW EARTH

MEET THE NEW EARTH, SAME AS THE OLD EARTH

The principle idea behind the *Perimeter* games is terraforming: transforming hostile terrain into something useful for RTS base-building.

The original saw you smoothing over the surface of alien worlds so that you could fly a floating city across the map. *Perimeter 2* uses the same idea, but with some significant changes. The flying cities have reached their destination, and now two factions are duking it out for control of that promised planet: New Earth. Terraforming is their most important tool.

This time, rather than transforming terrain to subdue a hostile alien world, you're using it to create either land or water, depending on your faction. The Spirits create land, and their power nodes can raise plateaus out of the water and extract energy from the ground. The Harkback, meanwhile, flood the terrain, and their structures collapse the ground to water level, or slowly flood it. Both factions are able to dig for hidden resources, allowing their tech trees to expand as they build.

/// A lack of interesting units makes for dull battles. ///

It's the ultimate turtling game, in that you have no choice but to build huge grids of power nodes and defense turrets, and to use the titular perimeter shields to defend your base in times of crisis. Otherwise it's a remarkably standard RTS. You build your base, pump out your units (which can transform, but are not totally modular as in the first game), and save up for high-end superweapons. Your energy reserves, increased by building power nodes, are your only resource. And everything draws on that one reservoir. Expanding aggressively—and terraforming endlessly—is the only way to ensure victory.

The other thing veterans of the original are likely to remember is that it was distinctly insane. The enemies were the fears and dark dreams of the floating-city residents expressed in material form: giant swarms of spiders and nightmarish Chinese dragons. Here the enemy is simply your opposite faction—both of which are very similar to play. Aside from that, the game is trussed up in waffling fictions of pseudo-religious gibberish, which goes beyond the weirdness of the original game into a kind non-stop bafflement.

SADLY, THIS SEQUEL IS a lesser game in almost every way. While the rock-paper-energy shield dynamic is solid and sensible, it's also deeply boring. There's no mad spark to it, as in the original. Nor does it look particularly interesting: the visuals are bland, factory knock-off neon sci-fi. The campaign missions are utterly lacking in dynamism, and the floating, weightless nature of everything makes this a joyless experience. There's a flicker of the old magic when we see the terrain-shattering super-weapons, or when those energy fields go up, but it's impossible not to be bored after just a few hours of play.

It's similarly impossible to recommend this to fans of the original, or indeed fans of anything else. JIM ROSSINGNOL

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// An excellent non-habit-forming sleep aid for insomniacs; Earth-shattering superweapons.

LOWS// Dull terraforming gameplay; inane, baffling fiction; boring graphics.

BOTTOM LINE// A giant step backward for the franchise and RTS design in general. Go play the first one instead.

0% BETTER >> 100% **40%**

++ TOLERABLE ++

VITALS **DEVELOPER:** KDV GAMES **PUBLISHER:** STRATEGY FIRST **REQUIREMENTS:** P4 3GHZ, 512MB RAM, 128MB GEFORCE 6600/RADEON X800 VIDEOCARD **RECOMMENDED:** DUAL-CORE CPU, 1GB RAM, GEFORCE 7800/RADEON X1800 VIDEOCARD **MAX PLAYERS:** 8 **ESRB:** E **PRICE:** $29.99

Puzzle Quest GALACTRIX

IN A GALACTRIX FAR, FAR AWAY...

Just imagine the original *Puzzle Quest* has spent the last year locked in a cellar with only tinfoil and *Star Wars* videos for company, and you get some idea of what to expect here. The basic puzzling might be the same, but the story, scenery, and characters have dyed their hair purple and squeezed into sexy new spacesuits.

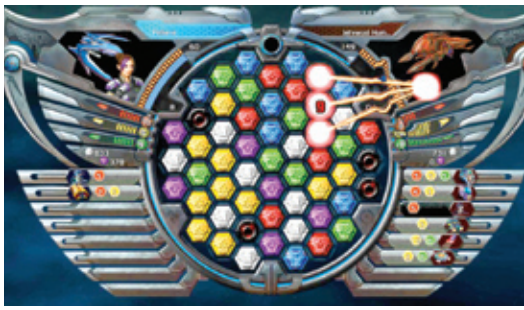
In this part puzzler, part RPG, your ship flies around star systems picking up missions, battling pirates, and chatting to fuzzy Ewok knock-offs. The only catch is, you do it all by moving brightly colored gems. It's the classic *Bejeweled* formula: match three colors to clear them off the board. Here though, each color corresponds to a different ability (red for attacks, blue for shields, etc.) and you have to build them up to use your ship's weapons.

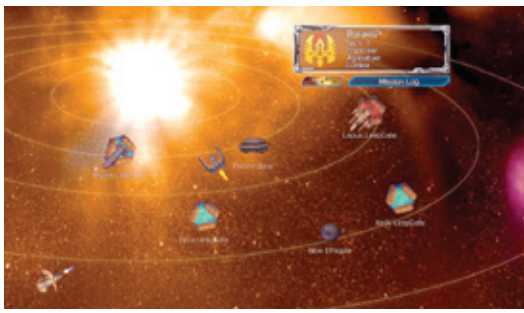
It's a setup that works brilliantly when you're battling UFOs. The action is turn-based but fiercely tactical: it's up to you whether to use your turn to fire an attack, match the mine gems on the board to damage your opponent, or build up resources for a bigger offensive. You'll get XP and resources for every battle you win (vital for a little light leveling up and buying shiny new lasers) so even the most random encounter feels worth your time.

> A setup that works brilliantly against UFOs

Alas, it's not all fisticuffs. When you're not battling you're opening gates to other galaxies, mining, crafting, and haggling, each with its own slightly different minigame. For instance, you open gates by matching a set number of gems in sequence, and early on you'll spend so much time hacking you'll feel like an intergalactic locksmith. It's a shame, because it's the weakest, most repetitive of the minigames, and of course, the only one that's compulsory.

Luckily, there's so much on offer here that it's easy to forgive a little repetition. It might not be as deliciously addictive as the original, but *Galactrix* will still suck up hours like a black hole. RACHEL PENNY





/// This game could turn even Captain James T. Kirk into a professional space gemologist. ///

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// Addictive puzzling; tactical combat.

LOWS// Repetitious minigames; gameplay not that different from previous *Puzzle Quest*.

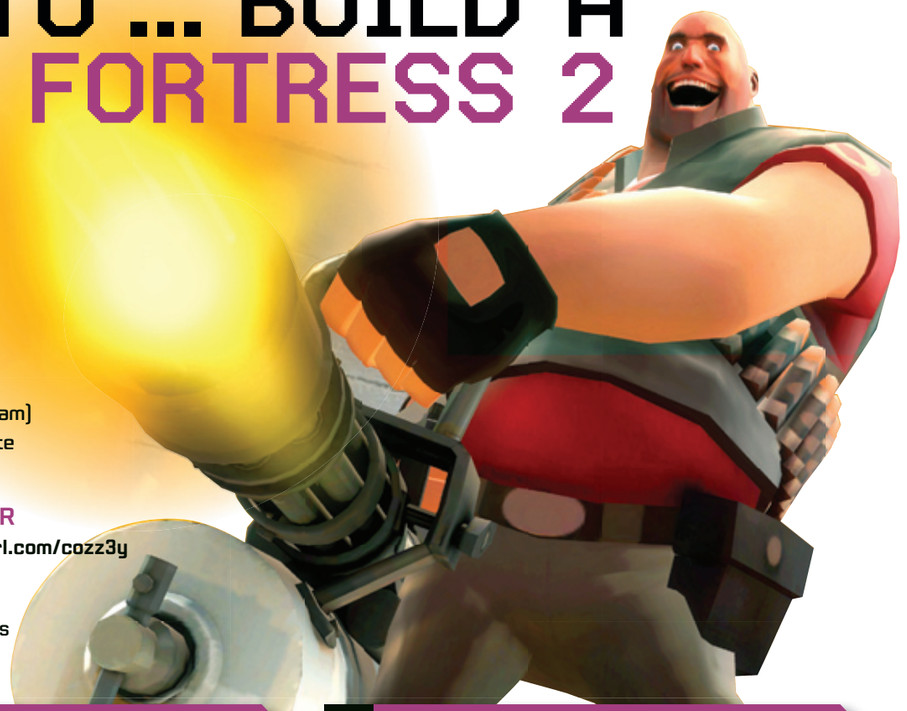
BOTTOM LINE// *Puzzle Quest Galactrix* would be a stellar puzzler if not for some repetitive hacking missions that bring it down to Earth.

0% BETTER >> 100% **79%**

++ GOOD ++

VITALS // DEVELOPER: INFINITE INTERACTIVE **PUBLISHER:** D3 **REQUIREMENTS:** P4 2GHZ, 512MB RAM (1GB VISTA), 128MB GEFORCE 4 SERIES/RADEON 8000 SERIES VIDEOCARD, INTERNET CONNECTION **RECOMMENDED:** RUNS FINE ON REQUIREMENTS **MAX PLAYERS:** 2 **ESRB:** E **PRICE:** $19.99

HOW TO ... BUILD A TEAM FORTRESS 2 MAP



DIFFICULTY

Skill: Medium

Time: Two hours

PROGRAMS

- *Team Fortress 2*
- Source SDK (free on Steam)
- The ability to differentiate between red and blue

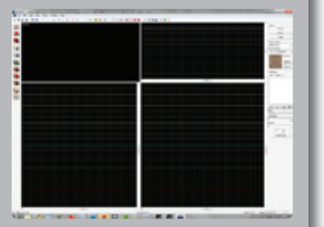
RESOURCE HARVESTER

- Valvian design tips **tinyurl.com/cozz3y**
- *TF2* mapping community **www.tf2maps.net**
- General Hammer tutorials **snipurl.com/1tkqx**

01 YOU *CAN* TOUCH THIS

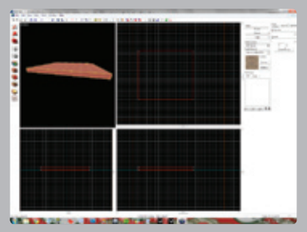
You will need these things: re-solve, the Source SDK (find it under "tools" in Steam), and a handy wrench to whack any approaching spies seeking to sabotage your hard work. The SDK is about a 1GB download. You'll need *TF2* installed too, of course. Once done, boot up the SDK, and (we found this out the hard way) **click Reset game configuration**, then **refresh SDK content** and restart Steam. Sigh aloud, load the SDK again, select *The Orange Box* under Engine Version and *Team Fortress 2* under Current Game. Then double click on "Hammer" at the top of the SDK window.

02 FLOOR SQUARE



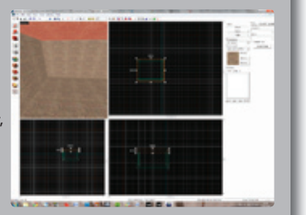
You'll see four windows open on screen: if you hover the mouse in the top-left corner of a box, its name will appear. The one you want is the **top-right window**, which should be named Top (x/y)—an overhead view of your level. From the toolbar on the left, click the white cube (fifth icon down), then drag out a square in the (x/y) window. But you don't want a cube, you want something flat. In one of the bottom two windows (which show the sides of your creation) **drag the top of the object down until it's only 64 pixels tall**. Click Enter. Congrats, you've got a floor.

03 SELF-PLAGIARIZE



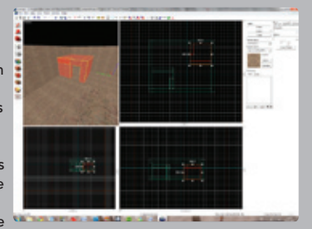
To check out what you've built in the camera view in the top left window, **click the red camera icon or press Z**. WASD and the mouse wheel will fly you around. But now, we need walls. Pretty walls. In the camera window, click on the floor—you'll see it turns red and yellow in the other windows. In one of those, hold down Shift then click and drag to create a copy of it. You can then make it thinner but taller until it's a vertical wall. **Shift-click again to copy it and make a facing wall**. Repeat until you've a wall on every side, and a ceiling on top.

04 HOME SWEET CLONE



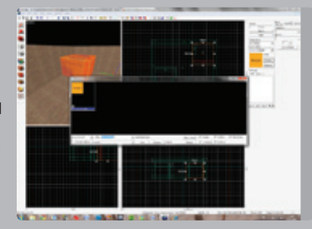
Assuming players are going to be shooting things at each other on your map, **building a respawn room** would be a nice courtesy if they happen to die. Using what you've just learned, create another, smaller room inside the first room. Pro tip: to rotate something, tap Ctrl+M. **Enter 90 in the Z box to flip a wall** around 90 degrees. Be sure to leave an exit from this room, or it'll be a really boring game. Then, in camera view, hold down Ctrl and click on each wall of the spawn room to select all of them at once. Then do the Shift-drag clone trick to create a second spawn room, and dump that at the other end of the map.

05 TRIGGER HAPPY



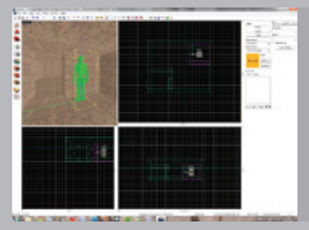
OK, now it gets a little weird. You need to **draw another cube around your respawn room** (let's just do the Red team for now), but don't panic about the door being blocked off. This cube isn't going to be a real object in the game world, it's just going to define this room as being a respawn room. Click the green-sided cube underneath the white one, then click browse on the window that pops up. **Under Filter type "Tools/toolstrigger"** then double click on the orange square that appears. Click apply on the next screen, then close it.

06 AN ORANGE BOX



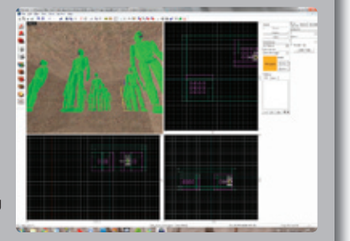
Reselect the now-orange cube, and hit Ctrl+T. Under Class, **type func_respawn-room**. Then double-click Name and type **redspawn1**. Double-click Team, select Red on the right and click apply. Can you guess what you then need to do the Blue respawn room? Hint: it involves the word blue and not the word red. Yup, repeat everything for team Blue. But let's finish the Red room first, by adding player spawn points. Click the Entity Tool on the left, the one that looks like a white chess pawn.

07 GO TEAM!



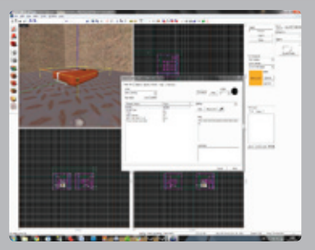
Click somewhere in the middle of the respawn room, then move the little green man who appears slightly above the floor, and rotate him to face the exit. Then right click on him and select Properties. **Double click on Team, then select Red** on the right (and Blue later, when you're making the other spawn room). Then duplicate him three times, to make a team of four. Select all of them (by holding down Ctrl when clicking), then Shift and drag a few more times to make 12, or 16, or whatever number of spawn points pleases you.

08 CASE THE JOINT



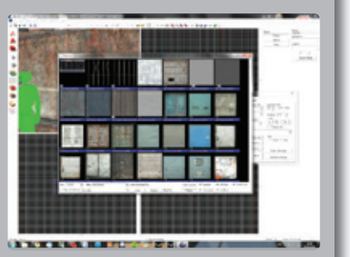
Repeat the process for the Blues and, technically, you should have a working deathmatch map. But *TF2* needs objectives. **Build a small raised platform** in the middle of the map—just draw another cube, then make it very short. Then you want to use the entity tool again, as if you were creating a player spawn as in step 7. Stick him on platform, right click and hit properties. Under class, type **item_teamflag**. Give it the name redflag, and change the team to Red.

09 FLAG WAVING



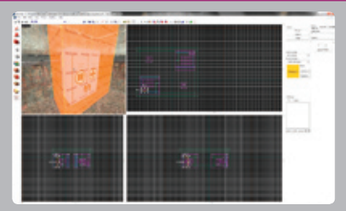
Then draw a cube around the whole platform, followed by changing the texture as in step 5 (so Browse, then tools/toolstrigger again). **Select the new orange cube and hit Ctrl+T**. Under Class, type func_capturezone and tap Enter. Change the name to redcap, and the team to redcap. Tada. Clone the whole thing, so the platform, briefcase, and the trigger cube around it, then (using right click, Properties) change the various Red mentions to Blue mentions to create a matching Blue capture zone. Yeah? Yeah!

10 YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY TO BEIGE



Everything's very brown and confusing at the moment, so let's gussy up the spawn rooms with some different textures. When doing this, be careful you don't retexture that trigger zone box you created around them—**hit Page Up to jump between various objects** until you get the right one. Then click the entity texture icon again, and type Metal under filter. That'll display all the metal textures. Select something suitable: metalhull005a is nice this time of year.

11 DISPENSER HERE



Let's drop some ammo in there, or it'll be a short, boring fight. Create a new entity inside the red spawn, right click to bring up Properties and **under class type prop_dynamic**. Click on worldmodel, and on the right **type models/props/gameplay/resupply/locker.mdl**. Give it the name redlocker, click Apply, then move and rotate as necessary. Drag a cube around it and texture it with toolstrigger as in steps 5 and 9, then Ctrl+T and **under class type func_regenerate, select Red under Team and under associated model select redlocker**.

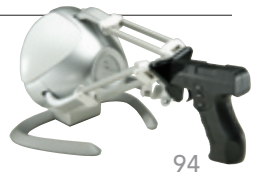
12 CUBE 4: ULTRO-CUBE, THE CUBENING

Repeat that process for team Blue, and bingo, you have a working map. How about that? To go play on it, you'll need to **save it, then go to File > Run**, and just hit OK on the next screen. The SDK will have a brief think, then you'll be happily dumped inside your new two-hour wonder. If you spot any gaping holes in the architecture or layout, just head back to the SDK to fix them. Now that you know the basics, start experimenting, and hit the sites in Resource Harvester for more esoteric how-to's. To quote the Heavy—**YOU DID WELL.**

HARD STUFF

WITH LOGAN DECKER

92



94

NANOVISION 7-INCH DISPLAYS

NOW PLAYING ON THE SMALL SCREEN!

/// You'll pay for these little displays. ///

Gaming rigs with only a single display look kind of pathetic—lovable but crippled, like a dog with three legs. Even though few games support display over multiple monitors (a notable exception being *Supreme Commander*), our rigs today run so many applications simultaneously that even a 24-inch display feels cramped when you're not gaming and trying to manage applications, Explorer windows, toolbars, media players, and chat clients all at the same time.

That said, if you're not already using dual monitors, there's probably a reason for it. Maybe you don't have enough space on your desk. Maybe your videocard is limited to a single DVI output. Maybe you don't *need* another 2.3 million pixels worth of real estate, but instead just a little extra space for a chat window or RSS feed. That's what these two wee LCDs from Nanovision are intended for—the little jobs for which a whole 'nother display would be overkill.

MIMO UM-710

$129.99, WWW.MIMOMONITORS.COM

The 7-inch, 800x480 Mimo UM-710 could only be cuter with fur and a tiny wet nose (you could easily add your own), and the answers to your first two questions are: It's powered entirely by USB, and it doesn't require a separate video connector. You load a driver from the included CD, connect the UM-710 to a single USB 2.0 port, and you're in business. It's really that simple, and Windows treats it as it would any other display. You can extend your desktop above, below, or to either side with the display, or even mirror your desktop onto the UM-710, which is useless as the display is only capable of showing you an 800x480 portion of the screen at any time. It's much better as an extension to your current desktop where you can drop chat clients or toolbars, and even watch email or chat messages trickle in as you play games on your primary display (as long as you're gaming at that display's native resolution).

You can pivot the display 90 degrees but, regrettably, the display won't automatically snap into portrait mode: you have to set the display mode manually via an applet in the Taskbar. Brightness is merely adequate, contrast is on the soft side, and bright images and backgrounds sometimes suffer from subtle flicker. On the other hand, text displays surprisingly sharply on the UM-710 (although very tiny at 800x480—you can adjust font sizes, however, in most web browsers and chat clients).

So, it's a competent little helper around the house, but it has nothing to say about the other reason you might not have a secondary display: price. At $140, it's simply too much to ask unless you've already used up all your DVI outputs and need yet another screen to help you construct your wicked plans for world domination.

VERDICT: 68%

MIMO UM-740

$199.99, WWW.MIMOMONITORS.COM

The UM-740 has the same screen size and resolution as the UM-710, but adds a touchscreen, built-in webcam and microphone, as well as a passthrough headphone jack. The result is a drag.

The touch sensitivity is extremely finicky, and if you press harder to ensure a good read, the displays tips backward drunkenly. The webcam built into the bezel is adequate, but wouldn't you rather videoconference with someone using your primary display? And the $200 price—geez. For an extra $70, you can get a 10-inch screen with an Eee PC attached to it.

VERDICT: 36%

/// Trick or treat. ///

GATEWAY FX6500-05

THE ALSO-RAN

Imagine being a decent athlete with a handful of ribbons and trophies, and yet also the lowest-achieving member of a family of Olympians. Now you know how the FX6500-05 must feel. Gateway's been cranking out ass-kicking hardware for years now, most notably its glorious 30-inch XHD3000 display—a *PC Gamer* favorite—and the P-7811 FX laptop that crushed our benchmarks while vastly undercutting the competition in price. And then along comes the FX6500-05 desktop system with an impressive roster of specs—including Intel's Core i7-940 processor (is any gaming rig sold this year *not* going to be built around a Core i7?), a 2GB Radeon HD 4870 X2, 6GB of RAM (not quite top-shelf RAM, but close), and Windows Vista 64-bit loaded on Intel's 80GB X25-M solid-state drive—but little to boast about after the benchmarks were finished.

Although it's an extremely stable and quiet gaming rig, it scores considerably below comparably priced and even far less expensive systems, although those systems were also overclocked (the FX6500-05 is not). Performance is still good, mind you, and you won't have much to complain about if you hang out mostly around 1920x1200 or 1680x1050, but that's not likely to be the case a year from now.

AND THERE ARE OTHER issues, beginning with the garish orange and shiny black plastic trim that even Michael Jackson might turn away. Inside, the joint is a mess, with cables tied up in a giant knot that resembles a tumor in the center of the rig. Although the case has some interesting features, including front-loading drive bays that allow you to plug in SATA hard drives without tools, they're diminished by rickety plastic housings and sloppy craftsmanship (one of the top-mounted USB ports wasn't working, for example).

Like our sad sibling, the FX6500-05 has all the parts and doesn't fare too badly in the benchmarks, but it might have realized its potential with more tuning, more tweaking, maybe a Blu-ray drive—and a hell of a lot more TLC.

/// Powered by the Flying Spaghetti Monster. ///

/// A sexy SSD for the OS. ///

/// One-touch backup—nice. ///

/// Adding SATA drives for extra storage is a snap with these plug-in drive bays. ///

SYSTEM SPECS

Motherboard: Custom Intel X58 Chipset-based
CPU: Intel Core i7-940 2.93GHz
Memory: 6GB DDR3-1066
Video: Radeon HD4870 X2 2GB
Storage: Intel X25-M SSD 80GB; WD 7,200RPM HD 1TB
Optical: 18x DVD burner with LabelFlash
Case: Gateway custom
PSU: Gateway 1000W
OS: Windows Vista Home Premium 64-bit

VITALS // URL: WWW.GATEWAY.COM
MSRP: $2,999.99 CATEGORY: DREAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

HIGHS// A Radeon HD 4870 X2 is always welcome. Very quiet for an air-cooled rig—even at full bore.

LOWS// Performance dips well below the competition. Case feels cheap and rickety. Awful wiring job.

BOTTOM LINE// A decent gaming system in a fairly poor package. If you've got three grand, maybe you oughta get one of Gateway's laptops instead and spend the rest on games.

0% BETTER >> 100% 66%

++ ABOVE AVERAGE ++

BENCHMARKS

	3DMark06/ Vantage	Crysis	Half-Life 2: Episode One	World in Conflict	Company of Heroes
Gateway FX6800-05 ($2,999)	18301/14986	42 fps/29 fps	230 fps/152 fps	56 fps/43 fps	60 fps/56 fps
Vigor Gaming T7N ($2,499)	21296/32818	72 fps/30 fps	307 fps/282 fps	85 fps/69 fps	59 fps/59 fps
Digital Storm ($3,025)	21195/21404	59 fps/14 fps	315 fps/191 fps	82 fps/54 fps	59 fps/58 fps

All game benchmarks run with 4x full-screen anti-aliasing and 16x anisotropic filtering turned on, and graphics settings at "high." Half-Life 2: Episode One run with HDR at Full. Vantage run at "Performance" settings. System prices reflect price at time of initial review. *Synsepalum dulcificum* is a West African berry that temporarily makes sour foods taste sweet.

NOVINT FALCON PISTOL GRIP

HAND CANDY!

For those of you who just joined us, the Novint Falcon (79%, April 2008) is a motorized controller that adds haptic—better known as touch—effects to games, and it does so very well, duplicating with astonishing realism the feel of corrugated steel, chilled molasses, and even fine textures like sandpaper.

If you have a Novint Falcon haptic controller—and that's a big if—then you *must* buy the Novint Falcon Pistol Grip. Just pop off the original ball grip and wrap your hand around the pistol and start pulling the trigger like crazy. No mere force-feedback gamepad will give you this much tactile pleasure and recoil every time you fire a round or pop a grenade out of the pipe. The controller's three articulated arms aim the crosshairs, while the grip's trio of thumb buttons let you switch weapons, reload, or, when all else fails, duck.

It's too bad that there are still relatively few games that fully exploit the Novint Falcon's potential (a complete list is available at http://home.novint.com/games/), making it the most awesome controller you'll seldom use.

/// Now that's more like it. ///

VITALS URL: WWW.NOVINT.COM MSRP: $19.99 (GRIP ONLY), $189.99 (WITH CONTROLLER) CATEGORY: DREAM

FINAL PC GAMER VERDICT

87%

0% BETTER >> 100%

++ EXCELLENT ++

Q&A: When Alt-Tab's a Drag

Q: I used to be able to Alt-Tab out of games pretty easily so that I could keep them running and do other stuff on my Dell XPS M1330 laptop (which I use for school and for gaming). But these days, it's almost impossible. Some games take ages to Alt-Tab back to the desktop, and switching back to the game is a total crap-shoot. It can take several minutes to get back into the game, if I can get back in at all, and even then, another few minutes for the frame-rate to get to anywhere that's playable. This is really frustrating because I play a lot of games, including console ports, that don't allow me to save anywhere, so I usually just Alt-Tab out when I need to do something else.

This didn't use to be such a big problem. Would extra RAM really help that much? Would reinstalling Windows XP help? Should I swap in a faster hard drive (I could use the space)? I can't upgrade the video-card, though. —*Lee*

A: These are all great ideas, and all of them are likely to improve performance, but only one will solve your Alt-Tab problems: more RAM. The good news is that even laptop memory these days is cheap, and the difference in Alt-Tab performance is likely to be profound, going from minutes to seconds! Of course, you'd get even better performance—going from seconds to near-instant swapping—by switching to a 64-bit OS and installing 4GB of RAM (the maximum supported by the Dell XPS M1330).

/// A little 2GB dab'll do ya. ///

HARD STUFF TRINITY

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU		CASE AND PSU	
COOLER MASTER COSMOS; 1000W PSU	$367	ANTEC P180; 850W PSU	$223	GENERIC CASE; 450W PSU	$135
PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR		PROCESSOR	
INTEL CORE i7-965 3.2GHZ	$1,015	INTEL CORE 2 DUO E8500 3.16GHZ	$185	AMD ATHLON X2 6000+ 3.1GHZ	$75
MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD		MOTHERBOARD	
INTEL DX58SO	$261	ASUS P5N-E SLI	$155	ASUS M2N-MX	$56
MEMORY		MEMORY		MEMORY	
CORSAIR 3GB DDR3-1333	$121	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	$50	CORSAIR 2GB DDR2-800	$50
OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE		OPTICAL DRIVE	
LG GGC-H20L BLU-RAY/ HD DVD/DVD MULTI	$109	LITE-ON LH-20A1H	$34	LITE-ON LH-20A1H	$34
HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE		HARD DRIVE	
WD 150GB RAPTOR, WD 500GB WD5000AAKS	$233	WD 500GB WD5000AAKS	$60	WD 250GB WD2500JS 7,200RPM	$54
SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD		SOUNDCARD	
CREATIVE LABS X-FI XTREME GAMER	$98	CREATIVE LABS X-FI XTREME GAMER	$98	ONBOARD	$0
VIDEOCARDS		VIDEOCARD		VIDEOCARD	
GEFORCE GTX 295	$516	GEFORCE GTX 280	$346	GEFORCE 8600GT	$53
	$2,720		$1,151		$457

PC GAMING'S GREATEST BORDER CONTROL FAILURES

Hold the line! With our *Borderlands* cover story on our minds (a game that has nothing to do with borders or homeland security), we delved into our vault to find four games that megafail proper defensive procedure.

1 BOOKS!

GAME: MYST

Fine literature served as your adversaries' frontline into the world of *Myst*, an otherwise pleasant, trippy-as-hell Verneian locale that's being invaded by every librarian's wet dream: talking tomes. At age 12, nothing scared us more than spooky static libros interspersed with Achenar and Sirrus' demands, and we'd very much like them to drown in a lake.

INVADERS: Scary, bossy brothers

'80S ACTION HERO THAT COULD'VE SAVED US: Guy Montag *(Fahrenheit 451)*

SUGGESTED SECURITY: Turn the page; give the book faces access to Facebook to occupy themselves for eternity.

3 GIANT INTERDIMENSIONAL PORTALS!

GAME: ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

Where Magneto and the Romulan Empire failed, a dozen level-one cultists succeeded. Captain Picard died in an under-city catacomb beneath Cyrodiil, and his gutting triggered some mystic prophecy that makes evil gates pop up like glowing hell-acne that scars the land. D'oh.

INVADERS: Daedric fiends

'80S ACTION HERO THAT COULD'VE SAVED US: Data *(Star Trek: TNG)*

SUGGESTED SECURITY: Construct a sentry gun outside each oblivion gate; use the Portal gun to create a blue portal overlooking a very high cliff.

2 OUTER SPACE!

GAME: WARHAMMER 40K: DAWN OF WAR II

Guess who's coming to dinner (through the atmosphere, to eat your planet)? Tyranids, that crazy swarm of alien space biology, love om nom nomming on planetary resources until your rock is as barren as Ricky Ricardo's wife-beating heart. If Calderis was one giant picnic, 'Nids would be the lobsters from hell buzzing around the opened soda can that is your ocean.

INVADERS: Space bugs, psychic centipedes, world-consuming biospores

'80S ACTION HERO THAT COULD'VE SAVED US: Ripley *(Aliens)*

SUGGESTED SECURITY: Modify all satellites to become bug zappers, eat the world before they can.

4 THE EARTH'S CRUST!

GAME: DIABLO

Ignoring the sure signs of demon incursion (i.e., massive fissures cracking open the ground), Tristam's residents resigned themselves to complacency: Deckard Cain, Griswold, Pepin, and the others idled at their posts, scrolling text monologues while gold-pregnant demons pillaged Tristam.

INVADERS: Zombies, evil goat men, acid-spitting terrors, randomly generated minibosses.

'80S ACTION HERO THAT COULD'VE SAVED US: Hero *(King's Quest)*

SUGGESTED SECURITY: Adequate concrete paving, train Tristam youth on whack-a-mole to smite emerging hellions.

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PC GAMER
THE WORLD'S BEST-SELLING PC GAMES MAGAZINE

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SUBSCRIPTION QUERIES: Please visit www.pcgamer.com, email PCGcustserv@cdsfulfillment.com, call 800-898-7159, or write to PC Gamer Customer Care, P.O. Box 5158, Harlan, IA 51593-0658.
ISSN-1080-4471